

Critter Corner - Critterizing Your Cottage

Dave deCalesta – KLA Newsletter 9/15

Those closing up their cottages in the fall for the long winter nap practice “winterization”—shutting off the water, draining the water lines, putting anti-freeze in the traps, turning the furnace down to 55F, asking a neighbor to check now and then to see if the heat is still on, bringing in all the dock furniture. Betcha they don’t “critterize” their cottages. If not, some get little (or big) surprises when they return in spring to open the cottage—the mouse droppings on the counter and in the pantry; the chewed-open flour or sugar packages; furniture shredded by squirrels that came down the chimney and couldn’t get back out (and eventually died of starvation); ditto the sooty raccoon footprints on the beds, rugs, and curtains; maybe the electrical wires shorted out (that hopefully didn’t start a fire) by mice that just love to chew stuff; the handful of acorns thoughtfully stored in the dryer that smelled “funny” when the dryer was first used in spring; the stinky, urine-soaked insulation in the walls and in the crawl space under the floor. And don’t forget the mountain of raccoon poop in the boat stored outside with the mooring cover left just a little too loose.

How do you “critterize” a cottage?

Step 1—keep ‘em out.

Check and seal all outside doors - there must not be any space below or above the door greater than ¼ inch (ever measure the height of a mouse’s skull? Didn’t think so). If those spaces exist, shut off the mouse highway by installing a door sweep (metal strip with flexible plastic skirt you can screw on the bottom of a door - also called a dust sweep) on the bottom of the door and screw or glue a thin strip of wood the width and length of the door on top of the door to keep out the climbers (didn’t know that mice can climb up a wall?).

Check and seal the exterior perimeter of the cottage - all walls where they meet in corners, or with soffits and eaves, must be tight with no gaps (that ¼ inch skull thing). If there are gaps, seal with clear exterior caulking (that *Great Stuff* expanding foam works well, but over time it morphs into a disgusting orange color). Usually there are screened vents in the soffit to let out heat in summer—make sure the screening is intact (it rots over time) and replace it if needed. Ditto the triangular vents in the attic gables—make sure they are screened with 1/8 inch hardware cloth and that it hasn’t rotted. Same thing for ridge vents, make sure the open ends are screened. Look for the beginnings of holes chewed in wood siding, these are the beginnings of squirrel doors into your cottage - cover them over with a piece of tin. If gaps are greater than ¼ inch wide, bend and fold 1/8 inch hardware cloth and stuff it in the cracks (steel wool works great also).

Seal openings around all pipes - hot and cold water pipes and waste water pipes for showers, sinks, and toilets come in through holes in walls and floors and usually the holes are generously

large enough for mice, rats, and chipmunks to wriggle right in (and past the rusting chrome collars that never adequately close off the space). These must be sealed, and these are the places to use the *Great Stuff* expanding foam. Ditto for gas lines and fuel oil lines (for oil-burning furnaces). Don't forget the coolant lines for air conditioners. Where the openings are visible from the outside, substitute clear exterior caulking for the *Great Stuff*.

Chimneys and vent pipes - chimneys for fireplaces, stoves, and gas water heaters are almost never critter-proofed. If chimneys have dampers that close completely (remember the ¼ inch rule), make sure they are closed tightly (potential problem with short returns for, say, Christmas or New Year's—the birds roosting and bats hibernating in the chimney will get a rude awakening if you start a fire, and your guests won't appreciate the extra sources of "fuel"). Better to screen chimneys at the top, or have covers installed that can be raised/lowered in the chimney for fires. Any gas water heater, or gas furnace will have a round chimney to vent combustion gases and the installing contractors *never* screen them. Make sure they are screened with 1/8 inch hardware cloth. And those vents for your toilet plumbing that come out through the roof? Rats love to dive down them and swim up through the trap in your toilet. Some people just put bricks on their toilet seats, but I prefer to screen the top of the vent pipes with 1/8 inch hardware cloth. That drier vent and the vent pipe for the shower? Make sure they are also screened tightly with 1/8 inch hardware cloth.

Crawl spaces? Very cozy winter retreats for possums, rats, raccoons that also love to nest, urinate, and defecate in the insulation under the floor boards. Make sure all access doors are secured with a padlock (so no-one can open the door and leave it open). Make sure all windows or other openings are tightly closed. Look for cracks from outside (light will shine in) and seal them from the inside with that *Great Stuff*. Rats can actually dig down under footer walls at depths exceeding three feet; discourage this tunneling with a solid layer of rock fill outside the wall at least a foot wide and deep. If lattice covers up openings that allow access under the cottage, the lattice must be screened to keep critters from crawling through the openings between the slats, another place for 1/8 inch hardware cloth, and tightly secured to the ground. Ditto for attics.

Step 2—eliminate the attraction. Never store any food of any kind in cottages over winter (unless in cans or bottles).

Step 3—get the Houdini mice & rats. Sometimes, when critterizing, you may actually trap animals inside your cottage. And, there are those persistent critters that may find ways past your exclusion efforts.

Trap 'em—bait mouse snap traps (wooden Victor traps are best) with a combination of 1/3 peanut butter, 1/3 oatmeal, and 1/3 bacon grease. Place traps on floors next to walls in all rooms with 2 in kitchen. If possible, have a resident neighbor check the traps a couple times each month to remove dead mice and rebait traps. If there is an attic, place a few traps up there.

Bait ‘em—it is legal to poison mice and rats. But DO NOT put poison baits inside the cottage. Rats/mice may die inside walls and smell really bad. Grandkids and pets may also find the baits. Place poison baits in crawl spaces under the cottage. Warfarin is good but messy. Ramik green pellets can be placed on aluminum pie tins and replenished over the winter (just don’t forget to remove all baits when you open the cottage in summer/spring). And make sure your neighbor’s cats and dogs absolutely cannot get access to the baits.

Boats—this one is easy. Make sure boats are covered with reinforced mooring covers tightly secured around sides of boat (most have elasticized ropes you can tie) and store them inside. If there are holes in the mooring cover around cleats or rings they must be covered tightly—sew a cloth flap over the opening(s) or secure them with snaps.

What’s hardware cloth? Grids of galvanized steel mesh with square openings of $\frac{1}{8}$, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, and $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Usually comes as rolls 4 feet wide, maybe 10 feet long. Salespeople at local hardware stores (not Lowes or Home Depot) usually will cut small sections from existing rolls so you don’t need to buy too much. Can be cut into any shape with tin snips and bends easily.