

OPEN DOOR POLICY

Text by Kathie Farnell

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We have a cat door. Since every exit is an entrance, we also have a possum, raccoon and possible snake door.

I find the local wildlife a lot less interesting since they've started coming into my kitchen. I already knew all about raccoons. The first one I ever saw up close lived in Tuscaloosa, apparently within easy walking distance of my house, where I saw him sitting on the second-story deck under the bird feeder. I thought he was Fred, my neighbor's tabby cat.

"Wow, Fred's gotten fat," I said. "And why is he wearing a mask?"

Once I figured out this was a large raccoon, my relief that Fred had not become a cat burglar was augmented by astonishment when the chubby creature climbed over the railing and crawled headfirst down the wooden deck piling.

I met a possum when one turned up in our bedroom closet. I had already gone to bed when Jack came in to announce, "There is a mole in the closet." No, I don't know why he said "mole." Possibly shock.

"Well, pick it up," I gritted, "and throw it out the door and quit bothering me with these details."

Jack stood his ground. "This," he said, "is a very big mole."

"Oh, for--" I jerked open the closet door and there was a yard-long possum, not playing possum but giving me a bloodthirsty look. "That is a possum," I said.

"Oh," said Jack.

So we chased it out with a broom.

You would think that I'd be used to this sort of thing, but when we moved to a small town rich in wildlife I was still somewhat taken aback to find possums eating out of the cat food bowl. At least the

possums were fairly easygoing, eating whatever was set out for the daily special, knocking over the water bowl, and scuttling out the way they'd come in. The raccoon was more interested in foraging. The odd thumping sound we heard in the middle of the night turned out to be a raccoon trying to open the kitchen cabinet to see if there was anything more appetizing inside.

We fooled him by installing a latch.

Peace reigned, although in wet weather I would find raccoon footprints circling frustratedly across the kitchen floor, until the day I purchased a new feather duster and left it propped in a corner of the kitchen next to the broom.

Apparently it was mistaken for a hen, for it vanished in the night leaving a single bright-yellow feather to mock me.

Imagine the confusion back at the burrow, or the hideout, or whatever raccoons call headquarters.

"Hey Zeke, this bird totally ain't got no meat on it."

"Doggone it ain't, Rocky, and what is it, anyhow, some kind of great big canary?"

"I don't know, Zeke, but let's don't go back to that

house any more."

Wishful thinking. I have to keep the replacement feather duster shut up in the bedroom.

There may be worse to come. My neighborhood, in addition to being a paradise for small animals who like cat food, has a number of interesting legends, one of which concerns someone's pet iguana which wandered off years ago. The creature has been sighted from time to time, usually in the form of an enormous tail snaking off into the foliage.

I'm concerned. Would you happen to know what a thing like that usually eats? ■

