

Screen Those Chimneys - Chimneys can look like good cavities for nesting.

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Well, the seasons change but one thing remains the same. Cavity nesters can pick some strange places to roost! While nesting season brings the largest number of disoriented owls, kestrels, squirrels, raccoons, bats, opossums, starlings, woodpeckers, or even wood ducks into living rooms across the county, it can happen at any time of the year. Unscreened chimneys can look like attractive cavities to animals who continue to lose their natural cavities in dead and dying trees as we humans build new houses, log, or simply landscape to get rid of those 'unsightly and dangerous' snags.

We strongly urge you to include screening your chimney as part of your annual cleaning this year - all it takes is bending a small piece of hardware cloth or welded wire to create a tight 'cap' over the top opening. This not only keeps animals and debris from falling in, it helps keep large burning debris from flying out. Such a "spark arrester" is actually part of the fire code for new construction in Eugene. There are special heat and rust-resistant materials made just for this, but simple ½"x½" hardware cloth is very inexpensive and will get you through a season or two.

Obviously, closing the damper/flue is NOT a solution to keeping animals out. If an animal does fall or climb in, often the only way to get him out is through the fireplace. Having him/her dying in the chimney is an unnecessarily cruel punishment for both the animal and you, when simple precautions can prevent the entire problem. With some mammals, like squirrels, opossums, or raccoons, lowering a thick rope from the top of the chimney might provide all the assistance they need to be able to climb out.

Besides actively preventing them from dropping in, providing alternative nesting sites would be very neighborly: put up owl or squirrel nest boxes, bird or bat houses (all easy to build or available locally) and leave dead trees or trees with attractive cavities where dead limbs have fallen off. In areas where swifts are losing their old growth snag nesting places, putting up a substitute chimney for nesting can help mitigate a potentially serious problem - and you'll be amply repaid in insect control! Swifts need a much deeper cavity than most hole nesters.

Though we may rarely see them, these wild animals live all around us and provide outstanding community service from eating insects and small rodents to cleaning up garbage.

Thanks for taking the time to be a good neighbor!