

SHELL SHOCKED

Recycling the Raccoon Way
By Art Stevens

I've had a lot of conversations with wildlife over the years. I've talked to alligators, geckos, herons, cats, dogs and turtles. But none of those conversations were as bizarre as one I just had with a raccoon.

My wife and I had returned home late one night from dinner and were watching a reality TV show featuring Sanibel couples eating blackened fish when my wife reminded me that we needed to take out the waste – or garbage as we referred to it in my time.

We agreed to toss a coin to determine which of us would wheel the big garbage can down to the side of the road and then come back for the newspapers, glassware and twenty empty Grey Goose vodka bottles.

I pleaded with her that I was enjoying the TV reality show which had just shown one Sanibel resident holding a garden hose to his mouth to relieve the impact of one grouper that had been blackened beyond the endurance point. She reminded me that she had lost the four previous coin tosses and that it was really my turn to take the garbage out.

I did the gentlemanly thing and said I would take the garbage out if she did the next four. The plate smashed against the wall just as I ducked out of the room to head toward the garbage.

It was a dark night and when I wheeled the garbage can out to the road I heard a shrill voice speak to me. "Are you ever going to make it easy for me to get into that can?"

I looked around. "Over here," the voice said.

I looked around and finally down. And there he was a black and white raccoon. "Yes," it said, "it's me. You know, you guys shut that garbage can so tightly that my family and I can't ever open it. Just once, can't you be kind and give us a little slack? We rely on people like you to overcook, leave leftovers and throw them in the garbage can. We can smell that food inside but just can't get to it."

Of course, I was flabbergasted. I always am when wildlife decides to communicate with me in my native tongue. But since it wasn't the first time that wildlife has talked to me I wasn't as staggered as I was when I interviewed my first alligator for this newspaper.

When I gained control of myself, I said "the reason I make sure that we secure the garbage can is that I learned an early lesson with you guys. I once didn't secure the can tightly enough and the next morning the contents of the can were all over the road. If you can't be neater in your ransacking activities why should I accommodate you?"

The raccoon jumped on top of the can to insure more direct eye contact. "Yes, I admit I was really sloppy that time. But the problem was that you put the left over food way at the bottom. My family and I had to claw our way through your monthly bank statements, moldy paper plates, plum pits, and all kinds of garbage we don't eat to get to the juicy parts."

"I'll make you a deal," the raccoon said. "Put the left over food right on top and we won't leave any garbage on the ground. We'll be as neat as can be so long as your left overs are edible and we don't get indigestion the next day."

I thought about the raccoon's offer. "Is there any particular recipe you prefer?"

The raccoon didn't hesitate. "Your wife makes a wonderful chicken cordon blue. And a neat Hungarian goulash also. Put those on top, leave the garbage can slightly open and we will be as neat as Emily Post rules of etiquette require. Not only that but if you do this for us my family and I will protect your house. We'll make sure that no rodent will ever make its way inside your house and that all snakes will be hands off."

I said, "You've got yourself a deal. But I now have to tell my wife that she'll be cooking for five, not two."

With that I headed toward the house trying to figure out how I could explain all this to my wife and not have her think that one of the plates she threw at my head moments ago actually connected.