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Creating a liveable city — for people and wildlife



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ST. VITAL

In 2006, the Capital Region Urban Habitat Stewardship Project produced a wonderful book called *Naturescape Manitoba*.

The book encompasses the collective wisdom of Environment Canada, Manitoba Conservation, Nature Manitoba, Fort Whyte Alive, and the City of Winnipeg. The City Naturalist's Office played a key role as project co-ordinator.

The book contains a wealth of information on making Winnipeg a more liveable place for wildlife through naturescaping. There is advice on topics including:

- native plants;
- essentials of habitat;
- birds, birdfeeders, and squirrels;
- diseases of concern (minimizing risks);
- tips for keeping wildlife outside;
- nuisance or not?

I consider this book essential reading for anyone who wishes to make informed decisions about naturescapes as they relate to Winnipeg's Liveability bylaw (2008).

The Liveability bylaw lays out rules regarding property maintenance, drainage, weeds, garbage, derelict vehicles, noise, outdoor burning, and mosquito control.

Last week, the bylaw was in the news when a homeowner appealed an order to remove "squirrel feeders on the property and the bundles of branches and scrap wood used as shelter."

The wording in the applicable section of the bylaw (Sec. 29, nuisances and unsanitary conditions) prohibits providing food or harbourage for pests or vermin. This is so broad that the bylaw could result in the removal of all plants if taken to the extreme.

Trees, flowers, vegetables, and grass each provide food or shelter for species that could be considered pests by the neighbours.

The word pest is highly subjective. Some people consider squirrels pests while others enjoy them. Vermin is a bit more precise because it implies carriers of disease. Unfor-

tunately, the bylaw does not provide a list of vermin nor indicate the number required to constitute an infestation. Nor does it distinguish between theoretical health risks and real health risks.

In the end, the committee allowed the continued use of the feeder as long as it does not create unsanitary conditions. I left the hearing wondering what standards would be used by the owner and enforcement officers. Tidiness? The quantity of seeds and shells on the ground? The abundance of droppings?

Bylaw enforcement officers can help resolve disputes between neighbours when complaints about naturescapes are made. However, they need bylaws that are clear, fair, and measurable.

Until then, if we want Winnipeg to be a liveable city for both people and wildlife, perhaps we all need to have more respect and tolerance for our neighbours — including those pesky squirrels.

Michele Kading is a community correspondent for St. Vital and the executive director of Save Our Seine — www.saveourseine.com

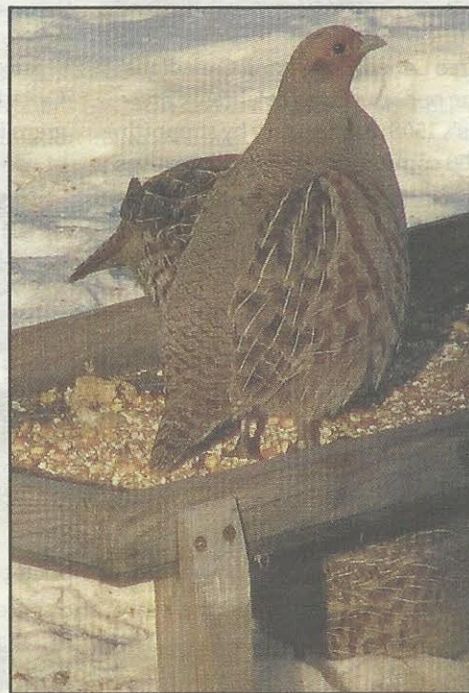


Photo by Michele Kading

Many birds, such as mourning doves, blackbirds, gray partridges (above), and larger sparrows will use platform feeders that are close to the ground.