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ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Staff Photographer

The long arm of the law, in his case, wields an animal snare. Jerrold Czech Jr., Philadelphia's only wildlife conservation officer, prepares to take another critter into protective custody

Daniel Rubin: For him, Phila. really is a zoo



By Daniel Rubin
Inquirer Columnist

Officer Jerrold Czech Jr. is running down the list of usual suspects on his beat:

You have your deer, raccoons, opossums, bats, great horned owls, screech owls, skunks, foxes, coyotes, turkeys, great blue herons, and occasionally your bald eagles, peregrine falcons, and red-tailed hawks.

This strikes me as an impressive lineup of Philadelphia wildlife, but when it comes to the ratio of animals to people, Czech's counterparts in the 135 other Pennsylvania Game Commission districts have him beat.

Where our city leads is in Komodo dragons.

"Drug dealers like them," says Czech, a sturdy 6-footer with a boyish thatch of hair, as we ride in his Ford Expedition. When not in zoos, Komodo dragons are often found in Indonesia, where they seize their prey with powerful claws and venomous saliva.

One dragon job from 2006 has stuck with Czech in particular. Someone called police to report a man walking a six-foot lizard on a leash in West Philadelphia.

"So," Czech recalls, "I go in after the Narcotics Strike Force, Animal Control, and the Fish and Boat officer. A gentleman's sitting on the couch with a handgun under the cushion. We clear the place. No dragon."

They're about to leave when they hear a noise above them. Czech tiptoes up the stairs, and in a box on a bed he finds the Komodo dragon, wrapped up in a motorcycle jacket. He cages it quickly.

"Thank God it was tangled," he says. "That thing was huge."

As the city's sole wildlife conservation officer, Czech has the job of keeping animals from hurting people and visa versa. Often he advises callers to do nothing. A fawn's in your yard? Its mother usually will be back soon. A little falcon's flopping around on your high-rise's window ledge? The fledgling's likely learning to fly.

"A lot of times these things work out naturally," says Czech, who is 39, the father of four, and husband of a Fish and Boat officer. He has agreed to take me along to show what his day is like. His beat is all of Philadelphia, and temporarily Delaware County, too. That takes in about two million people sharing 333 square miles with animals whose presence typically scares them.

His day starts in Springfield's Municipal Court, where he's grilled by a combative defendant who wears a sports shirt with *Liberty* printed on the back. The Glen Mills man is accused of supplying different Social Security numbers - neither his - on the application to renew his hunting license.

"Guilty," says the judge.

Czech's punch list includes checking in with a Delco farmer with off-season permission to shoot deer that have been chowing down on his crops. Czech will search in vain for a man in the Northeast who's been advertising a wildlife-removal service without authority.

Some work just seems to plop in Czech's lap.

As we drive along Chester Creek in Brookhaven, a young man passes, rod on his shoulder, cup of worms in his hand.

Czech pulls over. "Catch anything today?" he asks.

"Not yet - nope," the 19-year-old says. If he thinks he's being slick, he isn't. He's just admitted to fishing, and for that he needs a license. Czech writes him up.

Unlike most conservation officers, Czech aimed for the bright lights from the start. "Most come out of school and they all want to go to the Big Woods," he says. He worked his way through Temple as a park ranger. He's been the city's conservation officer, based in the Northeast, for 11 years.

We're headed for his office when a radio call alerts him to a situation involving a duck in a cage in Chester. The creature appears to be hurt.

On Thomas Street a crowd forms as Czech steps from the truck. Kids and adults observe the approach of the officer with the Batman-style tool belt of Mace, cell phone, pager, walkie-talkie, .357 Glock, 15-round clip, Buck knife, cuffs, and rubber gloves.

No one's home. A local animal-control officer arrives as Czech walks out back. Two pit bulls in the next lot jump excitedly. In a small cage, a fuzzy yellow-and-brown bird squats. It has roughed up its neck on the wire bars. And it's no duck.

"That's a baby Canada goose," Czech observes. "No food or water. It's illegal to have it."

He gives the animal to the control officer, and as we head north, Czech learns that a woman has called his headquarters.

She's at work and says it's her backyard where the caged goose was found. Only she doesn't know anything about the goose or how it got there.

"How'd she know we stopped by?" Czech asks.

These critters are the new face of Frankford

These critters are the new face of Frankford

By John Loftus

Times Staff Writer

Raccoons aren't what most of us might consider typical visitors to city back yards. They're certainly not your father's urban pests.

But the truth is that they're pretty much at home in a city. They are a presence in Philadelphia, and, at this time of year, a growing presence.

The furry, masked, ring-tailed raccoons are woodland creatures that like to hole up in hollow trees, so why would they feel at home in a city? Besides that, where do they come from, why do they stay and how do they survive?

It's probably hard to say with certainty how any creature makes its way into our neighborhoods, but there are woods within the city. Pennypack Park, for example, has plenty of woods with plenty of raccoons. And more every day, said Jerry Czech, the Pennsylvania Game Commission's wildlife conservation officer for Philadelphia.

This is the time of year when many creatures are producing young, he said, so people see more of them.

"Right now, everything is being born," he said. "There is an abundance of wildlife right now."

Also, parent animals are more visible because they are going out earlier and staying out later to find food for their offspring, he said.

And it's not just raccoons, he said. Philadelphia is home to all kinds of wildlife, including opossums, coyotes, wild turkeys and eagles.

"You'd be amazed," he said.

What's not particularly amazing is why they're here. Raccoons like garbage, he said, and people put plenty of food outside in their trash cans.

And with lots of trash cans in the city, the highly adaptable raccoons can get by on what humans throw away. Their sensitive front paws help them open trash cans. They're omnivorous, which means they can eat just about anything they fancy, from insects to berries to crayfish in a creek to fish in a back-yard pond to last night's leftovers.

And there's shelter, too. Not only will raccoons take up residence in abandoned homes, they'll move into attics or make do in garage rafters.