

Make way for foxes

BY MERIKE HESS, PARKWAY AREA ENRICHMENT, CAMBRIDGE, ONT.

Terri, the youngest member of the Wild Bunch, wandered out the back door of the kitchen of her grandparents' downtown Toronto home. She was carrying a grimy garbage bag, and she was searching for the bright green trash bin that her Gran had described.

"Oh, there it is!" she cried happily and ran toward the shady corner where the bin was placed. Suddenly, she stumbled and fell hard onto the wet grass, a result of the heavy spring rain. "Oof," Terri muttered as she stood up and turned back to see what had caused her to fall. She saw that she had tripped over a garbage bag that her brother, Michael, had left outside earlier that weekend when he emptied the indoor trash can.

To Terri's surprise, the bag was shredded to pieces, causing its entire contents to litter the grass. Puzzled, Terri called out for her sister, "Tanya!"

In the kitchen, Tanya Lucas was passionately debating with Michael about whether female foxes were officially

called "vixens" or, as Michael believed, "does." Just as she was preparing her final statement to prove her sibling wrong, Tanya heard her name being called urgently from the yard.

Tanya arrived outside to see her sister crouched, poking through a small pile of trash that evidently had come from the torn plastic bag in front of her.

"Terri?" Tanya said, "Did you do this?" Terri turned around. "Of course not!" she said with a bewildered look on her round, pink face. "It was here when I got here with the trash. Do you think an animal could be responsible?"

"My thoughts exactly," Tanya replied. "Most likely a raccoon or some other kind of rodent." Tanya glanced around the yard and was startled by what she saw. "There are several mouse carcasses out here!" she exclaimed, disgustedly. The two rushed into the house to tell Michael about their mysterious findings.

The Wild Bunch awoke early the next morning, in hopes of catching a glimpse of the perpetrator who had been making a mess of the garbage. Tanya, Michael and Terri shook themselves awake and descended down the stairs as soundlessly as they could, trying to contain their excitement.

Examining the scene of wreckage from the night before, they noted, in the light of the rapidly rising sun, that the claw marks on the ground and bag were much too large to be from any rodent in the Toronto area.

"There!" Michael whispered loudly enough for Tanya and Terri to hear from several metres away, as he saw, for the briefest of seconds, a swish and a blur of orange and white disappear behind a bush. "A fox? What is it doing in downtown Toronto?"

Michael started to follow the creature, but Tanya squeaked and grabbed Michael's arm. "If it really is a fox, we have to be careful and keep our distance. Spring is the time of year when female foxes, which are called vixens," — Tanya emphasized this word, looking pointedly at Michael — "give birth to their pups or babies. If her pups

are in that bush and we get too close, we'll be in deep trouble." Tanya explained all this in a rushed whisper.

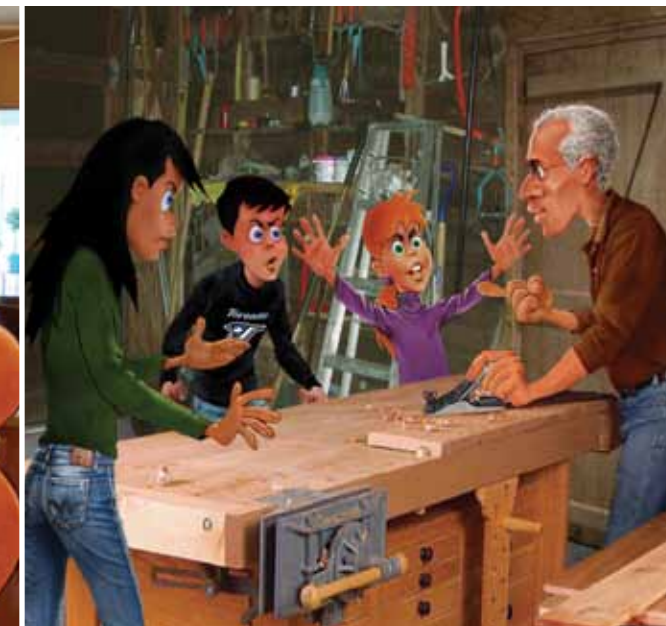
"What if we creep over quietly and just take a peek in the bush?" Michael suggested.

"I guess that's OK," Tanya said slowly.

The three siblings crept quietly towards the bush the fox had run into. One by one, they burrowed their heads between the leaves and branches of the bush and saw a den insulated with dried leaves and grass. But it was the creatures that filled the den that amazed the children. The scene before them was adorable beyond measure; a red vixen huddled with her five pups. The little foxes were whining piteously while nestled close to their mother's stomach, blindly competing for the best spot.

"Look at them! They can't be more than a week old, and their eyes aren't open yet. Fox pups open their eyes when they reach about two weeks of age." Tanya shared this information with Michael and Terri while she pulled her head out from within the bush.

Terri hopped up and down joyfully. "I love them already. Can we go tell Grandpa and Gran?"



"But Gran, why are there foxes living in the city?" Terri asked her grandma after the Wild Bunch had shared the events of the night before and those of the last half hour.

"The other day, in the local newspaper, there was an article that featured urban pests and brought to light one of the main reasons," her Grandma replied. "Large numbers of foxes have been moving to the city mainly because coyotes have been taking over foxes' dens in their natural habitats."

Turning to look at three intrigued, young faces, she continued, "But people of the city have, understandably, not been very welcoming to the foxes, because they carry rabies every so often and can be vicious to household pets and children. Some people also remember how foxes used to be bounty-hunted as pests in rural areas — the poor creatures." She finished with a grim expression on her face. "Your grandfather will want to know about this."

"That's where we're headed," Michael interrupted, already making his way toward the garage door, his two sisters in tow.

Once again, the Wild Bunch shared the story of the vixen and her pups in the backyard bush. But their grandfather received the news much differently than his wife had.

"A fox? Well, we must call animal control and have them culled!" he shouted immediately after learning of the existence of the six foxes, barely allowing Tanya to finish.

"What do you mean by 'culled' Grandpa?" Michael asked nervously, hoping that the word did not mean

what his deepest fears suggested. "Why, it means to be killed," his grandfather replied. "I don't want them getting comfortable around our house and rummaging through our garbage. I won't have it!"

All three of the Lucas siblings' faces went white with shock of what their grandfather was suggesting. Surely, there had to be another way.

Tanya started telling her grandfather about things he could do to control foxes, counting off ideas on her fingers. "Getting rid of unneeded piles of rocks and wood is a good start," she said. "Rodents tend to be attracted to such piles, which then attract foxes. Also, if you simply want to keep them from ripping apart your garbage, keep your bags in metal containers with a latch to keep the foxes from getting at them. There are so many other ways to keep foxes alive and for you to stay safe and happy." Tanya finished, hoping she had made her grandpa reconsider.



Tentatively, Tanya, Michael and Terri crept down the stairs. Their grandparents hadn't spoken to them about the fox problem for a few weeks now, since their last weekend visit. The Wild Bunch was worried that the foxes had been culled or removed after all. But when the children stepped outside, they saw that the usual pile of garbage-filled plastic bags had been replaced by two shining metal trash cans. Terri, Michael and Tanya beamed at each other, as they saw several tiny reddish orange paws moving behind the bush. The foxes were safe. 🐾

