Try a hawk pole for rabbit, gopher deterrence

After a summer of serious monsoons, harvest time should be a happy time here in the arid Southwest. But when our feral friends feed on the lion's share of our landscape's bounty, early autumn is rarely very blissful.

When deer, rabbits, gophers and other fauna threaten our plants and trees, we usually choose between one of two options. We either encourage them to find food elsewhere, or we exterminate the beasts of burden.

Fortunately, there is a third option that has worked successfully around Santa Fe not only in reducing rabbit and gopher damage, but in increasing local raptor populations. It's called a hawk pole.
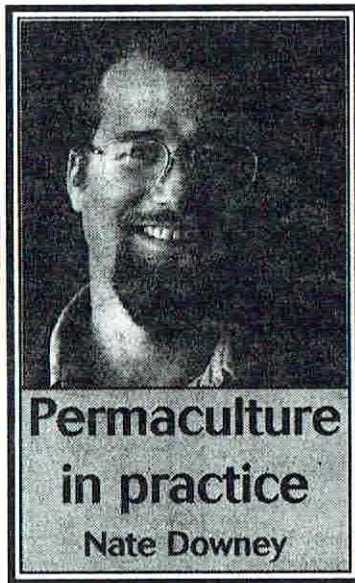
Hawk poles serve as the bird of prey equivalent of a drive-thru restaurant. Picture the busy intersection of Rodent and Rhubarb. A hawk pulls up, waits, and finally decides whether to pick up a field mouse appetizer, go for a gopher, or maybe move straight to a supersized rabbit meal big enough to share with the whole family.

Hawk poles are tall posts that stand a minimum of 12 feet (15 feet is better) above the tallest vegetation in a particular area. In order to install your own hawk pole, first dig a hole in the ground deep enough to support the top-heavy pressure of your chosen pole. Second, while the pole is laying on the ground drill two holes in the top end and stick branches in the holes to function as perches. Finally, place the pole in the ground and tamp any loose dirt at the base of the pole until fully compacted.

Be careful. As pole heights increase, so do the dangers of installation. Where local piñon and junipers have reached maturity, putting up posts that tower over the trees is not easy. Also make sure that your chosen location is not too close to any structures or places where people typically congregate.

As far as encouraging animals to find food elsewhere, the best deterrents are fences. Keep in mind that deer are high jumpers (not long jumpers), so angling the top of your fence toward their habitat will give the deer a longer, more difficult jump. This method also helps to deter rabbits. However, as with all burrowing animals, make sure that your fence is buried at least 18 inches deep. It also helps if the buried part of the fence can be installed so that it slopes upward.

If fencing a large property does not fit within your budget, consider fencing individual plants and saplings until they become tough enough to withstand occasional nibbling. When birds are a problem, fencing your fruit trees and gardens from above can be accomplished easily with bird netting.

Other benign ways of deterring animals from your landscape include sprinkling various substances such as blood meal, human hair and human urine around the flora that you desire to protect, leaving a radio on in your garden for deer, setting clackers that drive gophers batty, and of course there's always the pain-free, catch-and-release trap for rabbits and other small mammals.

As a last resort, exterminating our furry friends may be justified in extreme cases of plant or tree loss. Painful traps, toxic poisons and noxious gases can be purchased locally, but each method poses safety risks and/or ecological problems.

From a purely permacultural perspective one could kill, prepare and eat (or otherwise utilize) such an animal before killing it. In this way the animal at least returns to the system through a positive process, not a wasteful one.

Of course, most of us have grown so accustomed to prepackaged food that eating wild rabbits is nearly as rare as riding in covered wagons. For this reason it makes sense for most folks to leave the killing up to the raptors, and work on the preventative methods listed above.

Nate Downey is president of Santa Fe Permaculture Inc., a local landscape design, installation and consultation company. He is an active member of the Permaculture Drylands Institute's teaching team and of the International Erosion Control Association. He can be reached at (505) 984-8881 or nate@sfpermaculture.com.

Permaculture in practice
Nate Downey