

Find wildlife

With the right training and budget, this service can be a boon to your business

By Heather Gooch | PMP Editor-in-Chief

Many pest management professionals (PMPs) find themselves fielding calls about wildlife removal, both from loyal customers and potential customers who assume “pest control” includes whatever critter is slinking around their porch foundation. There may come a point at which the team starts thinking less about responding “Sorry, we don’t offer that service” and more about asking, “Why don’t we offer that service?”

Chances are, if the company offered wildlife control in the past, they know exactly why they don’t offer it now: It drained their resources; a good wildlife employee was nearly impossible to find; the equipment just got too expensive. These are all valid reasons — but they’re also easy to overcome with just a little legwork before hanging out the wildlife control shingle.

Stephanie Hoffer is in the opposite situation. She and her husband, Jody, founded Honea Path, S.C.-based Precision Predator Removal in 2016. They added general pest management in 2022 and are now known as Precision Pest & Wildlife Removal. The couple were well-versed in wildlife before starting the company, with Jody having been a wildlife technician and a state trooper. Growing up on a dairy farm that later became a white-tailed deer farm, Stephanie also was no stranger to controlling rodents and other vermin that would get into the outbuildings. She earned her wildlife license, and up until recently was out in the field

on a route. Now, she serves as a full-time office manager for the firm.

Jody is overseas on a tour of military duty until late fall, but Stephanie notes she and the team are starting to find their footing on the pest control side. “Hiring someone who has pest management experience was the best thing we’ve done to build our pest control division,” she says. Industry veteran Andy Thiesfeld began as a consultant to the Hoffers, then was hired full-time and now serves as Precision’s pest division supervisor.

Customize every strategy

Finding footing on the wildlife management side when you’re already a PMP can be tricky. So says Jackie Thornton, ACE, the second-generation co-owner of Alvin Pest Control in Alvin, Texas. He only became a wildlife control provider about 10 years ago, after observing how those around him tried and failed.

“Too many PMPs try to create a formula for controls. It works for pests, but it’s a miserable failure for wildlife, and even rodents,” he points out. “We’re dealing with living organisms that don’t want to die; they don’t want to leave; all they want to do is survive. They have much more complex thinking patterns than

an insect. They outsmart our controls.”

Wildlife management is hard, Thornton says, and it’s even harder to make profitable. But for motivated problem solvers who are willing to put in the work it takes to keep a step ahead of the pest, it can be rewarding. “I just want to focus on the technical part of my job, be it insects or vertebrates,” he says, adding that the old joke about “I kill’em and she bills’em” applies to him and Betty, his wife and company co-owner. “I care zero about sales and key performance indicators. I leave that to the team.”

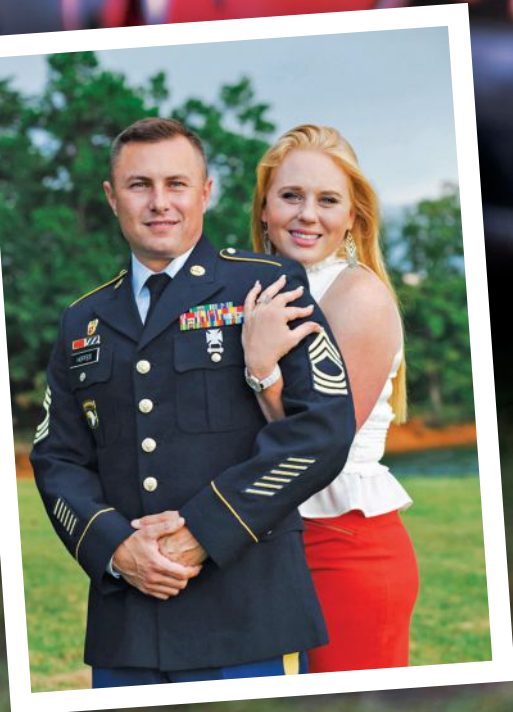
“Extreme weather can hurt your business if you’re not prepared. You must get creative. For example, we save attic remediations for the winter.”

Stephanie Hoffer

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SUCCESS

Stephanie Hoffer says she and her husband, Jody, drew up plans for their company while he was on tour in Afghanistan.



FIND WILDLIFE SUCCESS

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Relationships lead to referrals

Jay Wilkins, owner of Wilkins Wildlife & BedBug 911 in Delmar, Del., spent years in pest management before opening his own business to turn his

attention to wildlife control and bed bug management only. He doesn't regret the career shift, because he has good referral relationships with several pest management colleagues.

"The only part I kind of miss is the recurring revenue model you get with general pest control,"



“Whether it’s an insect or a vertebrate, they all manipulate airflow. If there’s a gap or crack — a breach in the barrier — they will find it and exploit it to get to the food, water or shelter.”

Jay Wilkins

he admits. “But I found a niche in which I excel. It’s because I can take my time and knowledge to treat an account properly and gain success.”

The knowledge part of the equation, Wilkins says, is extremely important to share with clients, and even would-be clients.

“To me, it’s a partnership, partnering to solve the problem,” he explains. “I’m giving them my time in exchange for money, knowledge and results. It takes a lot of pressure off the client, who is usually frightened by the wildlife situation, to look at it in that light.”

Meg Pearson, training manager for Marietta, Ga.-based Critter Control, a Rollins

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PHOTO: JAY WILKINS

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FIND WILDLIFE SUCCESS

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work, but the other 50 percent will haunt you. And that last 5 percent is just going to get you in trouble," he says. "You never want to face the customer and admit you cannot solve the problem. You must keep trying until you do."

When hiring, Hoffer says it's important to present expectations up front. "Make sure they understand the full scope of what you do, and what they'd need from you to accomplish that. We're not playing with animals all day," she says. "I have an initial list of 10 questions I ask before I



“There is always going to be that person who walks by, sees an animal in a trap, and frees it, making it become trap-shy. That person doesn't know the public health threat, the reasons why we're doing what we do.”

Jackie Thornton

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even schedule an interview. This weeds out a lot of candidates and saves time.”

Wilkins says he subscribes to *Pest Management Professional* Hall of Famer Dr. Austin Frishman's credo, "Think like the insect." He applies it to wildlife as well. "What season it is will influence an animal's behavior," Wilkins points out. "If a female raccoon is foraging during the day, it's not a given that she is rabid. Rather, she could be feeding herself, so she has time to go back and teach the kits how to forage after dark. You must get into the mind of the animal and predict its behavior. That's only going to come from research and experience.”

PHOTO: JACKIE THORNTON

Training employees and customers

While Texas has plenty of state-required standards for wildlife control, the training program for Alvin Pest Control goes above and beyond. Thornton treats it like an apprenticeship, where a new tech works alongside an experienced tech for months.

“We require both a written and in-the-field proficiency exam before they go out on their own,” he explains. “And I am always a backup as someone to call. I know what it’s like to be at a job with complex problems and feeling hopeless as the customer stands there with arms crossed, tapping their foot. I don’t want them to feel that.”

Technological advancements, from in-trap remote monitoring to live feed cameras, have helped make the job a little easier.

“Before we had the ability to be notified when a trap hits, we’d have to go back to the account every couple days,” Thornton says. “You either went out there and found nothing, or you found a carcass decaying in the Houston heat. Neither is a great option.”

Wilkins tries to relocate, rather than euthanize, where possible. “I have a handful of rehabilitators I can call when I encounter a fox with mange, for example,” he says. “If they determine it can be nursed back to health, that’s where I’m going to take it. Many customers are relieved to know that not only will I get rid of the animal, I may be able save its life. Of course, that’s not always possible; if that is the case, we take care of things humanely. We want to do what is in the best interest of the humans first, and then the animal. But knowing that is our approach, rather than only trapping and killing every

time, gets us positive referrals. I’d say as much as 90 percent of my clients do not want the wildlife harmed in the removal process.”

Hoffer agrees. “The way state laws are written, we can take injured animals to rehabbers, and we encourage our customers to consider making donations or

volunteering with local facilities,” she says.

Being visible in the community and building relationships with animal care groups bridges an education gap. “People will have preconceived notions that ‘Oh, you’re just going to drown the

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Continued from page 33 animal.' My physical presence in the communities, remaining emotionally neutral during conversations, explaining when and why we need to lethal trap — when they get to have that conversation, it helps. I'm an open book that is going to answer their questions calmly and honestly, so they can understand why we do what we do."

Pricing and getting started

Wilkins says wildlife management professionals need to charge their worth. Pricing might mean he's not always the first one people call to take care of a problem, but "I should be the last, because I will get it done."

If she and her husband had to set up her pest control division

over again, Hoffer says, the biggest change would have been to not set up a completely different Employer Identification Number (EIN) and bookkeeping: "We learned very quickly that in reality, the two divisions help each other because we're able to help our clients with *all* their needs."

Hoffer suggests PMPs who are looking to add wildlife control services, the inverse of what she and her husband have done, consider the following:

- 1** Hire an experienced wildlife person to serve as a guide, if not a leader for the entire division.
- 2** Start with "ground wildlife" that do not require investing in additional ladders. These include skunks, snakes and groundhogs.
- 3** Once you're comfortable with offering ground services, move to exclusion: foundations, vents, crawlspace doors, etc. Slowly add

in working with dryer vents and small porches, and bird work.

4 When you're ready to take on "roof liability," add the attic pests.

5 The final step would be moving to traditional trapping for beavers, coyotes and other, larger wildlife.

"We have built our business purposely to take my husband and me out of the field," Hoffer concludes. "I went from running a route to sitting in front of a computer. That's a big change of pace. But your team must figure out the job for themselves, be able to educate the client, sell the job and do what's needed to finish the job. This isn't happening overnight, but it is taking place. We take it one day at a time." **PMP**

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Six Steps to Success

Stephanie Hoffer, co-owner of Precision Pest & Wildlife Removal, Honea Path, S.C., recently presented “Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me When Starting a Business” at the 2023 Wildlife Expo. The event took place Feb. 7-9 in Myrtle Beach, S.C., and was sponsored by both the National Pest Management Association and the National Wildlife Control Operators Association.

1 Continually evaluate and balance your priorities.

As a wife and mother of four, Hoffer says there is a time for working long hours and a time for being present for family, as well as taking time for yourself. A burnt-out company manager is no good to anyone. “Everything in moderation,” she suggests.

2 Learn how to talk about yourself and your business.

“Perspective is everything, and our minds are our most powerful tool,” Hoffer says. “Don’t describe yourself as a ‘little business’ or ‘a one-man operation.’ Talk about yourself from the perspective of where you want to be — a growing business, a successful business.” The same goes for your employees, she says: “They’re not your ‘helpers.’ They are your technicians, your team members.”

3 Hire a certified public accountant (CPA). Not only can a professional accountant help you navigate taxes and finances, but many also can help with legal issues, insurance, hiring and more. “Don’t just meet with them once a year, either,” Hoffer advises. “Schedule times to meet throughout the year to touch base about your business growth and what’s next.”

4 Work within your budget. That said, do not cut corners on insurance, legal paperwork like contracts and warranties, or quality employees.

5 Embrace change. “You can’t have growth without change. They go hand-in-hand,” Hoffer says.

6 It’s OK to walk away from a sale. Stick to your standards and don’t lower your prices. Some clients are not going to be worth the hassle. In a similar vein, Hoffer says, just as in pest control, some clients are going to try to push their luck. They’ll ask you to trim a branch, blow leaves off the roof, and more “while you’re up there.” “If you are going to do something even if you’re not charging for it — although you should be — put it in your contract,” Hoffer says. “If your word is good, it’s just as good on paper.” — *H.G.*

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