*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**Woodchuck’s return an unwelcome sign of spring**

The ultimate harbinger of spring has appeared; I’m not happy.

I love the crocuses popping out of the soil and the growth of the perennial herbs. I’ve even enjoyed being able to start cleaning our flower gardens. Those are welcome signs that spring is here.

What I didn’t like was the reappearance of an old nemesis — a woodchuck peeking out of my garage window.

Regular readers of this column with long memories — thank you for your ultimate patience and devotion — may remember that woodchucks and I do not get along. A column I wrote a few years ago about wiping out a woodchuck offended some.

I don’t care. Woodchucks — also known as groundhogs or land beavers or whistle-pigs — destroy gardens and threaten foundations with their burrowing. And they’ve taken shelter in our garage — aka storage shed — by digging up the dirt floor and creating a massive dune. We’ve had rows of vegetables taken out overnight by those marauding marmots.

One of the window panes in the garage is missing and the other day I saw something sticking out. I first thought it was one of the cats. I looked closer. Sure enough, it was a woodchuck.

I’ve been told that groundhogs can be controlled with non-lethal techniques such as harassment, disturbing their burrow system by plugging it, or placing foul-smelling materials like mothballs or kitty litter at their entrances.

I’ve tried all those things. The only harassment I haven’t tried is a restraining order or dropping my cell phone down their hole so they receive all those calls about an extended car warranty about to expire.

The only effective way to remove woodchucks is to remove them. I retrieved my .22-rifle and waited for the woodchuck to crawl out the window so I could have a clean shot. But apparently Mr. Woody was following proper social distancing because he didn’t come out.

Even though sheltering at home gives me more time than usual to sit and wait for a woodchuck, I opted for Plan B and placed a live trap near the garage. I put a couple of apples in the cage trap for bait.

A few hours later I saw the plan had worked. There was an animal inside the trap. But it didn’t look like a woodchuck. Upon closer examination, it was our cat Lady Jane Grey. She was happy to be released.

I reset the trap. So far no results. The groundhogs are plotting. Maybe it was just the wind but I thought I heard the chant of na-na na-na boo-boo deep underground.

**Shadows remain of roads less traveled**

Spring is the season of mud as we wait for fields to dry. Years ago, before the roads were paved, spring travel was sometimes challenging.

Many original roads and highways in the country followed town sections or natural contours around and over the hills. It wasn’t until automotive transportation became more regular that some of the roads were moved or hills were cut to eliminate the curves.

This is the time of year when we lose the snow cover; before the woods become green, we can trace some of the original routes. We can still see vestiges of old roadbeds cut out on the sides of the hill.

One route I travel regularly is Jackson County Road C to Black River Falls. When I was a kid, the road over the Disco Ridge contained a series of hairpin curves. The highway was rebuilt sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s, but I can still see parts of the old road.

A little farther west, just inside the town of Franklin, is an old stone bridge where traffic used to run. The landowner told me a few years ago that her husband insisted the county leave the bridge there; he would maintain it.

It’s still there, a lonely reminder of days gone by.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at* *chardie1963@gmail.com**.*

***Captions:***

* *041620-agrv-life-hardie-1 A purple crocus emerges from the soil.*
* *041620-agrv-life-hardie-2 A crocus is one of the early blooms of spring.*
* *041620-agrv-life-hardie-3 A live trap caught one of our cats and not a woodchuck.*
* *041620-agrv-life-hardie-4 A stone bridge along County Road C in Jackson County was once the main highway.*
* *041620-agrv-life-hardie-5 County Road C once traveled this route.*
* *041620-agrv-life-hardie-6 County Road C was once higher up on the ridge.*