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City critters adapt to urban landscape

Sprawl is making human encounters with wildlife more common than

BY JENNIFER WILLIS

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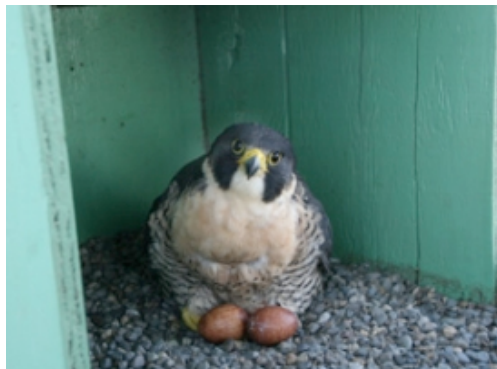
Portland's parks, green spaces and proximity to a river attract people – and wild animals.

Whether you live close to the wetlands or in downtown Portland, chances are you've encountered urban wildlife: a raccoon living under your office building, a raptor nesting overhead, a coyote wandering through your yard.

Many wildlife populations are struggling with increased human sprawl. Some people consider city wildlife a nuisance, but habitable urban areas are important to the survival of many species.

"Wildlife isn't just something that happens out there in the wilderness areas and national forests," says Bob Sallinger, urban conservation director at the Audubon Society of Portland. "Urban areas play very critical roles."

After nearly being wiped out by the pesticide DDT, peregrine falcons have made a comeback by adapting to city living. Five percent of Oregon's known peregrine falcon population now can be found on Portland's bridges.



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There is wildlife in our midst and it's multiplying. Here a peregrine falcon incubates some eggs on the Interstate Bridge.

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“The most productive nest site in the state of Oregon is on the Fremont Bridge,” Sallinger says.



“We’re incredibly lucky in this city,” he says. “You can go to downtown Portland and watch peregrine falcons courting overhead. This is like the jet fighters of the bird world. It’s one of the most spectacular sights you can see on this planet – far more exciting than anything you’re going to see on TV or the movies or your Gameboy.”





Three species of endangered salmon swim through downtown Portland to get to their spawning areas, and Portland hosts the largest known Vaux’s swift roost in the world. Hundreds of Portlanders gather each September to watch the swifts swirl down the chimney at Chapman Elementary School.




Coyotes a risk for pets

Sallinger points to the recently passed Measure 26-80 as movement in the right direction.



“Voters voted overwhelmingly to allocate \$227.4 million to protect water quality, wildlife habitat and access to nature,” he says. “People actually care about nature close to home.”




But a face-to-face encounter with an urban coyote can leave even the most ardent animal lovers concerned about safety in their neighborhoods.



Sallinger says there’s a lot of misinformation circulating about coyotes, even though there has never been an unprovoked coyote attack in Oregon.



“This isn’t an animal that’s predatory toward humans,” he says. “You don’t get stalked by a 30-pound coyote.”



Coyotes can, however, pose a threat to small mammals – including pets, who may view a coyote as just another dog.



Coyotes are opportunistic, explains coyote enthusiast Rhonda Piasecki of the Friends of Tryon Creek State Park. They usually wander into inhabited areas looking for food – attracted by garbage cans, compost bins and food left out for free-roaming cats. Once they learn where the food is, they come back for more.



“If you have a small dog or a cat that you leave outside, they can potentially become coyote food,” Piasecki says. “Coyotes really don’t discriminate. They pretty much eat anything.”



Preventing problems before they occur is key, says urban wildlife specialist Karen Munday of the Audubon Society of Portland. To make sure you’re not attracting coyotes to your property, she advises eliminating potential food sources – including fallen fruit from trees – and keeping pets inside at night.

“Coyotes’ primary hunting periods are between dusk and dawn,” she says.

Sallinger also stresses the need for tolerance.

“Somebody moves into Forest Park and wants the coyotes to be gone,” he says. “You can kill a lot of animals, but you probably won’t eliminate something like a coyote from potentially being in your backyard down the road.”

Besides, Sallinger says, elimination presents another danger: “You start killing coyotes, you’re talking about sodium cyanide, leg-hole traps and neck-snares. Those aren’t necessarily good for your cat or your dog either.”

“The first solution shouldn’t just be removal or killing,” he says. “It should be trying to find a way to coexist.”

Knowledge is a good thing

The Urban Wildlife Resource office Web site offers a wealth of information about living alongside coyotes, raccoons, crows and other animals. The office's phone line is staffed seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Munday estimates the office receives 15,000 phone calls every year. They do get conflict calls, but they also hear from people who are excited about wildlife in the area and want to learn more.

"In the winter, we get a lot of phone calls about hummingbirds," she says. "How do I feed the hummingbirds? Why haven't they migrated?"

"Having birds in your backyard, experiencing wildlife firsthand is really critical in building a culture of conservation," Sallinger says. With some awareness and a few adjustments, we can learn to coexist peacefully with urban wildlife, and even celebrate the eco-diversity of Portland.

"The best thing you can do for wildlife, without question, is just naturesscape your yard," Sallinger says. By planting native vegetation and reducing hazards like roaming cats, you can turn your yard into an attractive habitat for migrating birds.

"They might stop on Mount Tabor in the spring," Sallinger says, "but next stop is who knows where – maybe your backyard."

Audubon Society of Portland's Urban Wildlife Resource office

Where: 5151 N.W. Cornell Road, 503-292-0304

Hours: 9 a.m. to

5 p.m. daily

On the Web:

urbanwildlife@audubonportland.org;

www.audubonportland.org/livingwithwildlife

'Coexisting With Urban Coyotes'

What: Lecture by Rhonda Piasecki, executive administrator, Friends of Tryon Creek State Park

When: 2 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 28

Where: Tryon Creek State Park, 11321 S.W. Terwilliger Blvd.

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