



100 years of development hasn't slowed.  
Urban sprawl continues to threaten wildlife.  
And animals are forced to either adapt or perish.

# INTERSECTION OF SPECIES

PHOTOS AND STORY BY CORBIN SULLIVAN

Raccoons are capable of producing an uncannily convincing human banter while they mill about for food in the dead of night. It's an obvious quirk of evolution but has proven useful. In many parts of North America, the bandits of the animal world are almost entirely dependent on human refuse and the habitats created by urban sprawl for their way of life. While they're knocking over garbage cans in search of fast food leftovers, their guttural chirping noises can be misleading. I once woke to a raccoon cracking open a jar of Skippy, but before I left the tent to find it scurrying away, I was convinced it was the dirty children who were sleeping in the adjacent campsite.

While raccoons might be one of the most recognized of urban wildlife, they are not

alone. A host of other animals, including whitetail deer, opossums, squirrels, skunks and hundreds of bird species make the parks, sewers and trees of America's cities their homes. When people see these animals, they tend to view them as intruders into the human landscape, interlopers on land that is rightfully claimed and marked proudly by pavement and steel. It's the typical irony brought by human hypocrisy.

Though we as a species take pride in our ability to adapt, calling it one of our defining traits, we fail to recognize the same in the animals that have not only adapted to urban environments, but in most cases thrive. Disdain swells instead of pride when we step out our door and find a family of opossums playing dead or smell the thick

stench of skunk road-kill. The reality is these city animals are simply playing the hand humans dealt, and playing it well.

## SPRAWLING AMERICA

Urban sprawl is an ever-growing concern in the United States, but not for a lack of land. A quick glance at a U.S. map shows that there is still far more undeveloped land in the vastness of America than the urbanized areas that are the epicenters for sprawl. The growing anxiety is more among environmentalists than developers. Worries of habitat destruction — losses of wetlands and forests — have environmental lobbyists pushing for smart land use decisions in every state in the union.

But animals like the raccoon and opossum would seem to discount their concerns. After

all, there weren't always humans to scavenge from. All the animals that now prosper in urban settings are also capable of surviving in the wilderness. There must be something that sets urban animals apart from the poor creatures that are driven further toward extinction with each new shopping center.

The main linking trait among most flourishing urban animals is that they are "opportunistic" species. Similar to the plants that pop up in bare plots of dirt or through sidewalk cracks, most city animals share the ability to succeed where others have failed. Many, such as the raccoon and opossum, are omnivores, so they have a virtually unlimited food supply that grows exponentially with the voluminous food waste produced by American society.

Simply being able to adapt would not be enough for some animals, since they are considered pests and would likely be exterminated if easily found. Fortunately for most urban wildlife, their waking hours come during the night. The raccoon, skunk and opossum are all nocturnal, so their forays into the parks and streets often go unnoticed. These animals also make their homes in the kinds of nooks and crannies that are provided by the overlooked aspects of human homes: attics, chimneys and under porches, houses and sheds.

Urban wildlife fit into the human world like pieces of a puzzle. Humans can't fill all the gaps, so the animals are the missing pieces. They take up the spaces and use the resources that are left behind.

## LIVING IN DISHARMONY

Even with the apparent success of various species of urban wildlife, their relationship to humans is a relatively new phenomenon. The majority of America was settled only 200 years ago, and major urban centers hadn't reached all corners of the country until about 1900. The theory, according to The Fund for Animals, is that most urban wildlife was already existent in the areas that became cities, so instead of vacating, the animals found a new niche.

One imagines that most city animals went unnoticed during the massive urban growth of American cities. Dirt roads, horses, poor sewage systems and lack of street lighting were distractions from the scavengers that crept around at night. Even those that ventured during the day wouldn't have been as noticeable because of an integrated agricultural and urban environment. Cincinnati, known as "Porkopolis" in the late 1800s because of its pig processing industry, was teeming with pigs in yards, streets and sometimes in buildings. A raccoon would be a small worry next to herds of pigs roving the streets. But cities have modernized, and

the problems that come with urban wildlife have become more apparent.

Most city animal problems are actually selfish expectations on the part of people, considering we caused their inconvenience, but they are problems nonetheless. Raccoons, skunks and opossums are foragers and diggers, so they often damage gardens and lawns in search of food and shelter. Garbage cans are also an attractive food source, and an improperly sealed disposal bin can mean a waste strewn yard if urban animals catch its scent.



**"Obviously one doesn't shoot squirrels in an urban backyard."**

**"Pest removal" post on Gardenweb.com**

Deer are a less common urban animal, but they can also prove to be a nuisance. Whitetail deer are extremely populous throughout the middle part of the country, but are unable to make a home in the same kinds of human shelters that smaller animals can find. Instead, their inclusion as a city animal is more because of spillover from woodlands adjacent to urban areas. The deer feed on lawn grasses and garden vegetables, often destroying both, but they pose the biggest problem on the roads. While hitting a raccoon or a skunk with a car can be an unpleasant experience, hitting a deer can be a life-threatening event. States such as Wisconsin and Michigan have more than 40,000 deer-related accidents every year, according to their respective insurance information services. All told, deer cause more than \$665 million in auto damages each year in the United States.

Both deer and the smaller urban animals can present a risk for disease transmission

to humans and their livestock. Deer are sometimes carriers of bovine tuberculosis, a potentially devastating disease if introduced to cattle populations. Raccoons and skunks are both natural rabies carriers, so contact with domestic pets and humans could lead to passage of the disease.

## DON'T SHOOT

Naturally, the reaction to urban wildlife problems is to seek ways to get rid of the animals. The first solution, more often than not, seems to be slaughter, but there are several reasons why this option is not entirely viable.

Frequent postings on Gardenweb.com ask for "pest removal" advice. Most mention the possibility of killing the animals, but as a post by a Seattle resident points out, dispensing with urban wildlife can be difficult: "Most of you folks who've battled squirrels with traps and assorted firearms sound like you're out in the country, rural areas. Obviously one doesn't shoot squirrels in an urban backyard."

Trapping can also be a problem, because there are plenty of pets that are just as likely to wander into the traps. For those who are more conscious of the animal's suffering, relocation is an option, but most animals don't fare well under the stress of transportation and new environments. Some may have been raised completely on the security and benefits of human surroundings and refuse, and may not have the ability to survive in the wild. Relocation is also expensive and inefficient.

The best remaining option for dealing with urban wildlife is to make it want to leave.

Arlington, Texas, has a fairly extensive program of public education that is aimed at helping people rid their property of pesky urban wildlife with non-traditional means. Instead of shooting or trapping, the city suggests removing attractants such as garbage cans and pet food that keep the animals interested in their property. Ammonia soaked rags and cayenne pepper stuffed in suspected hiding spots can also be a repellent, according to the Arlington Animal Services. For the less typical urban animals, such as deer, the Arlington program suggests planting foliage that isn't as appetizing to their palate. For those who would choose to disobey city gun laws, the animal services warn that shooting unwanted urban wildlife is only a temporary solution. More will always be there to take their place.

Urban dwelling animals likely will not go away. As long as there is trash to feed on, they will be there. Minimal efforts can ensure that they won't destroy property or terrorize pets, but the long-term goal is certainly not to rid cities of wildlife. Humans would do better to accept the animals that were there before them, as they have done in turn. 🌍