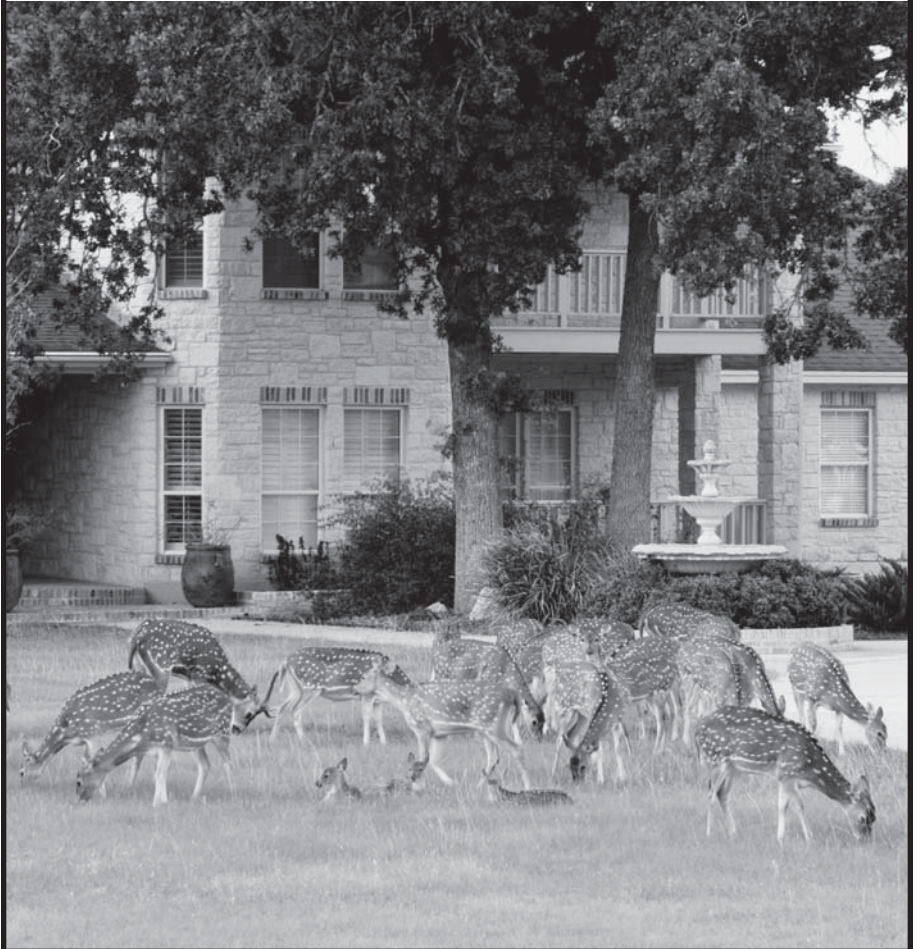


TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE

Interacting with Urban Texas Wildlife



Interacting With Urban Texas Wildlife

Texans enjoy wildlife on a daily basis. Whether it is the birds and dragonflies you enjoy during your daily commute, or the armadillo you see foraging along the roadside, chances are you will encounter some wildlife in some way daily, even “in the city”!

This wildlife though, while a valuable and educational part of our communities, often leads to concerns and even complaints from Texas residents. There are some simple things you can do to minimize your concerns, and those of your neighbors, while still enjoying your home among Texas’ urban wildlife.

Many of the “issues” we will discuss in this booklet develop as a direct result of urban sprawl—the constant expansion of our urban centers into areas that were once “pristine,” wildlands where deer, fox, opossum and other wildlife made their home. As our communities expanded, wildlife either moved out or adapted their behavior to allow them to survive in an urban landscape. Dens were replaced by the crawlspace under a mobile home, carcasses were replaced by the neighborhood trash cans or cat dishes, local waterholes were replaced by birdbaths and garden pools. Understanding this, the easiest way to control wildlife encounters is to minimize the reasons for wildlife passing through your garden—usually summarized as food, shelter and water. Cleaning up outdoor pet food that is not eaten during the day, controlling access to food wastes, maintaining your yard, and keeping wood or rock piles back from the house will reduce the food and shelter options.

Pets, in general, lose many of the survival instincts of wildlife, just as we lose these instincts when we reside in cities. Coyotes, foxes and other predators recognize this as an easy meal and will not resist an opportunity when presented. Knowing this, keeping our pet cats and dogs from running freely reduces the

probability of predator losses. This is not a one-way street, however; dogs, and especially cats, are a significant source of wildlife loss in the United States each year.

This booklet introduces some of the wildlife common in Texas communities, and the issues associated with these animals. It is intended to provide the homeowner with guidelines to help them live with wildlife in our suburban and urban landscape.



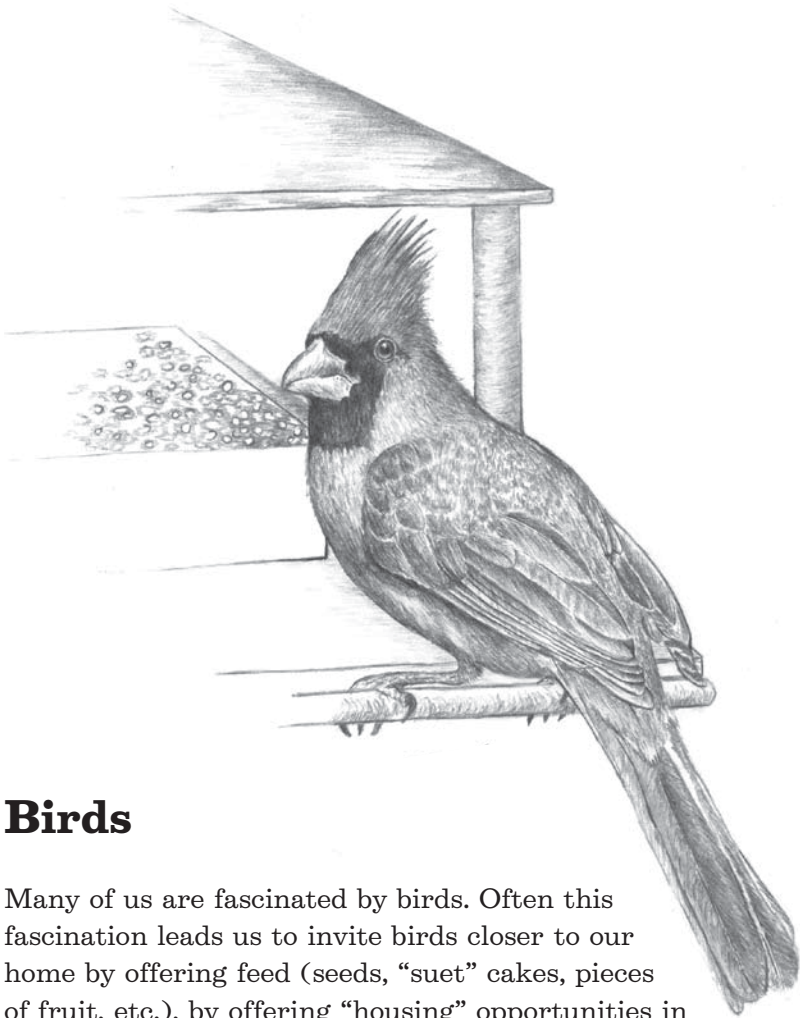
Deer

In some parts of the state, deer have become overabundant — meaning they are present in numbers that exceed the landscape’s ability to support them. One of the symptoms common with this condition is that the deer begin moving into areas that they traditionally avoid — suburban landscapes and urban green belts. This presents a number of safety issues for both the deer and the human population. Collisions with automobiles become common; deer may carry parasites like ticks, which can carry pathogens dangerous to humans such as Lyme disease, deer can be a safety hazard when they lose their fear of humans, especially the bucks during mating season (late fall and winter). These situations are not beneficial to the deer population and become a nuisance for people in the community.

These situations can be reduced by following a few simple guidelines that make the community less attractive to the deer. Feeding deer is never a good idea, especially when they have become a community hazard. Deer can be fed either directly and intentionally with deer feeders or corn piles, or indirectly as a result of scattered food or open feeders intended for birds and small mammals.

Another frequent consequence of over abundant deer involves landscape damage. Deer will also browse on many plants that we find attractive and frequently use in our landscapes. This damage can be reduced by selecting plants that deer find less desirable and by carefully fencing plants they find highly attractive. A good list of deer resistant plants can be found at: http://www.npsot.org/plant_lists/deer_resistant.html.

If deer are present it is very important not to treat them as “pets.” These animals are wild, and as such may cause injury if approached.



Birds

Many of us are fascinated by birds. Often this fascination leads us to invite birds closer to our home by offering feed (seeds, “suet” cakes, pieces of fruit, etc.), by offering “housing” opportunities in the form of nest boxes, and through other activities. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department encourages this in a responsible manner through programs like Wildscapes (www.tpwd.state.tx.us/wildscapes) or the Texas Hummingbird Roundup (www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hummingbirds). However, there are some things we should consider when trying to attract birds to our property.

While attracting birds can be entertaining and educational, we must consider the birds' safety and health. Feeders, nestboxes and other apparatus intended for bird use must be kept clean, safe and available to our feathered guests. Foods should be selected carefully and include a reliable source of clean, dry grains. When storing food, it is important that it not get wet, since mould can harbor pathogens that can be deadly to the birds. Clean-up should focus not only on the feeders, but also on the ground under the feeders to remove virus and fungi.

Although many species of bird prefer to feed on or close to the ground, scattering seed on the ground in urban settings often leads to complaints from the neighbors. Ground feeding can attract rodents and other pests to the area. A more responsible way to meet the needs of these birds is to offer a tray-type feeder with seed.

When people feed birds, we often receive complaints about hawks visiting the bird feeders. Several species of hawk are quite comfortable in urban surroundings, with some species, like Red-tailed Hawks and Peregrine Falcons, actually nesting on the sides or roofs of tall buildings. These hawks are an important part of our ecosystem, keeping rodent and bird populations healthy and under control. These animals, like most North American birds, are federally protected and must not be harassed or harmed in any way. Should they present a consistent problem around your bird feeders, the safest control measure is to remove their source of food by removing the feeder that is luring birds to the area, thus moving the hawks on.

A number of Texans are surprised by bird behaviors in the spring. Prior to nesting, male birds become quite vocal, singing to attract mates. Sometimes, especially in the case of our Northern Mockingbirds, this singing can occur at inopportune times — late into the night or very early in the morning. In the

case of woodpeckers, male birds may drum loudly on wooden or metal structures for the same reason. These birds are claiming their nesting territory, protecting against intruders, and trying to attract a mate. Mating generally occurs over a relatively short time period in early spring, so this is a temporary situation.

Nesting birds, regardless of size, can be very aggressive. It is not unusual for Mockingbirds, Barn Swallows and other birds to “dive-bomb” people “intruding on their nest space.” Remember, these bird nests are protected and moving or disturbing them is not a legal option. The best solution is to choose another access to the building or avoid that portion of the garden for a couple of weeks while the young are developing. These protective parents are going to provide you with hours of enjoyment as you watch them care for their family. Once the young fledge and are moving about on their own, you should be able to return to normal activities.

Woodpeckers, particularly Pileated Woodpeckers, Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Northern Flickers, can be quite destructive if they choose to excavate a cavity in the side of your home or outbuildings. Providing an alternative cavity directly at the site being damaged will remove this nuisance, and provide entertaining and educational viewing for some time into the future. See http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/publications/pwdpubs/media/pwd_bk_w7000_0616.pdf for more information on controlling woodpecker damage.



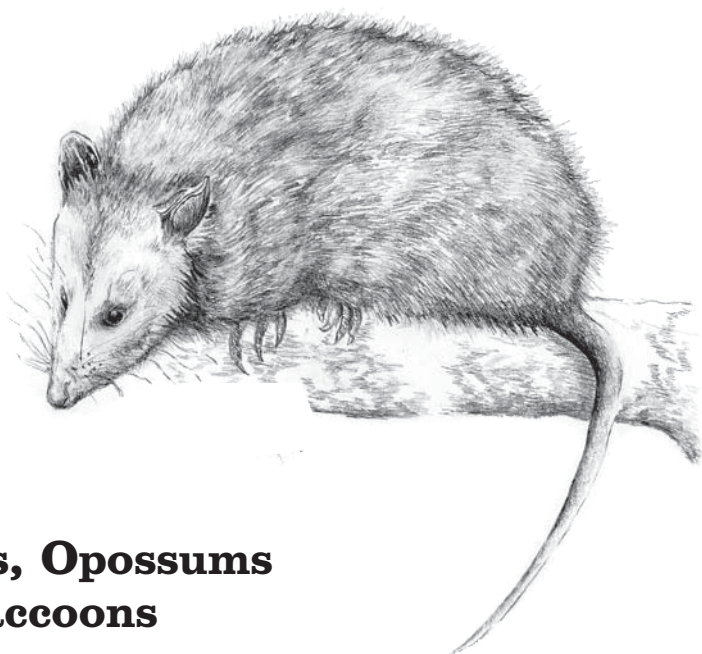
Coyotes and Other Predators

Predators always present concerns, especially if you have children or small pets. If pets go missing from the neighborhood, it quickly becomes a major issue. The loss of cats and dogs, though, is more likely due to accident than it is to predation. Certainly, it is highly unlikely that a mountain lion is going to hunt cats or dogs, they are simply too small in most cases to make the hunt worthwhile.



The most common predators in the urban environment are coyotes, foxes and bobcats. During the spring and summer months, coyotes and foxes feed heavily on a diet of insects and plant materials. They become predators of small mammals primarily in the fall and winter, when other foods are scarce. The bobcat, on the other hand, is an obligate predator that feeds primarily on rodents and small rabbits. Certainly small, unattended pets with few predator evasion skills would be considered easy prey. It is never a good idea to allow pets to run unattended.

In general, wildlife do not make good pets. Foxes are considered fur-bearing animals in Texas and can not legally be kept as pets. In addition, we often have serious rabies issues in Texas and these animals are known carriers of this disease. It is an offense to sell or transport a live fox or coyote within the state of Texas under the current rabies quarantine.



Skunks, Opossums and Raccoons

These animals, often referred to as “varmints” or “pests,” also do not make good pets. Rabies remains an issue with these animals as well. Moving or selling raccoons within the state of Texas, or to and from Texas, is prohibited under the rabies quarantine. Skunks are among the most noted carriers of this disease. Opossums seem to be resistant, though they can occasionally contract the disease.

Controlling these animals in an urban environment is dependent on carefully cleaning up and securing all food scraps, including pet foods. If you feed your animals out of doors and the animal does not eat all of the food, it is important to bring the food dishes in and clean up around the feeding site before dark.

These animals are notorious for getting under homes or into attics, often resulting in damage to electrical wiring and other utilities. To prevent this, screen all access points to these areas from the outside, sealing entry points where possible.

These animals will also be attracted by ground feeding of birds or small mammals.

Snakes

Although there are 15 kinds (species or subspecies) of venomous snakes in Texas, the vast majority (some 105 other kinds) of snakes found in Texas are not venomous and present little or no threat to people or pets. Venomous or not, snakes play a very important role in keeping rodent and insect populations in check, and they should not be destroyed without reason.

The expansion of human communities into once-rural landscapes will result in occasional encounters with snakes. These encounters can be minimized by proper landscape maintenance. Minimize shelter by keeping brush, rock piles and woodpiles out of frequently used spaces. Control rodent populations by making their food sources harder to access and avoiding ground feeding of pets or birds. Screen crawlways, and maintain the screen so that snakes do not have easy access under the house. These few simple steps will greatly reduce the probability you will encounter a snake in your yard.

Most of the snakes you encounter will be trying to get out of the way. A snake that takes a defensive posture has probably been surprised or cornered, and will move away if given the opportunity. A few rules you might follow:

- 1) Never put your hands or feet anywhere that you can not see.
- 2) If you encounter a known venomous snake, stop until you are sure it is safe to do so and then move back slowly.
- 3) Never handle an animal you are not sure of. This is good advice for all wildlife.

Honey Bees

There is a good possibility that you could encounter Africanized honey bees in most areas of Texas. While their colloquial name “killer bees” evokes images of nasty animals hunting out a victim, attacks by swarms of bees are usually associated with the disruption of a hive or swarm. The best advice with honey bees is to minimize contact. Stay away from known hives or swarms. If you encounter a swarm, contact a licensed professional pest-control operator for eradication or safe removal. For more information on honey bees in Texas, visit www.honeybee.tamu.edu.





Tarantulas and Scorpions

When a Texan sees a scorpion or tarantula walking across the floor (as is sure to happen at some time anywhere in Texas) for the first time, it often evokes visions of the Hollywood dramas where these animals are used to execute some hated enemy! Scorpions and tarantulas in Texas are generally not life-threatening (except in cases where the person has allergies). The sting or bite of these animals is comparable to that of a bee. Since chemical control of scorpions is difficult, modifications to potential habitats surrounding human habitation is a good first-step control measure and should include the removal of refuse and other debris, keeping grass cut near the home, and never bringing firewood inside unless it is placed directly into the fire. For more information on scorpion control, visit www.landscapeipm.tamu.edu/good_bad.

Spiders

Two species of spider in Texas present a potential threat to human health — the black widow and the brown recluse. While most spider bites present little concern unless the person

injured has allergies, it is still wise to seek medical assistance in the event the bite is one of these species. Because spiders nest in quiet, undisturbed areas, discourage them by cleaning and vacuuming closets, cellars and other such areas frequently. You can also seal buildings with caulk, screening and weather stripping to keep spiders from entering. For more information on spider control, visit www.landscapeipm.tamu.edu/good_bad.

Red Imported Fire Ants

It is wise to avoid contact with fire ant mounds — especially for small children, small pets and vulnerable populations. These animals can present a painful bite and will swarm if they feel the nest is threatened. Treating obvious mounds (not the entire property) with an appropriately labeled insecticide per label instructions is the best way to avoid injury by these animals.



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