

Urban Wildlife: Our Animal Neighbors



Life Skill: Critical thinking

Project Skill: Creating habitat for urban wildlife

Objective: Observe urban wildlife, record information, and use findings to develop a wildlife habitat improvement plan

Success Indicator: Participants prepare a wildlife habitat improvement plan and map

Provisions Needed

- Mapmaking supplies (paper, pencil, ruler, compass, protractor, etc.)
- Binoculars
- Camera and film
- Wildlife amenities, such as bird feeders, bird-baths, etc.



Trailhead

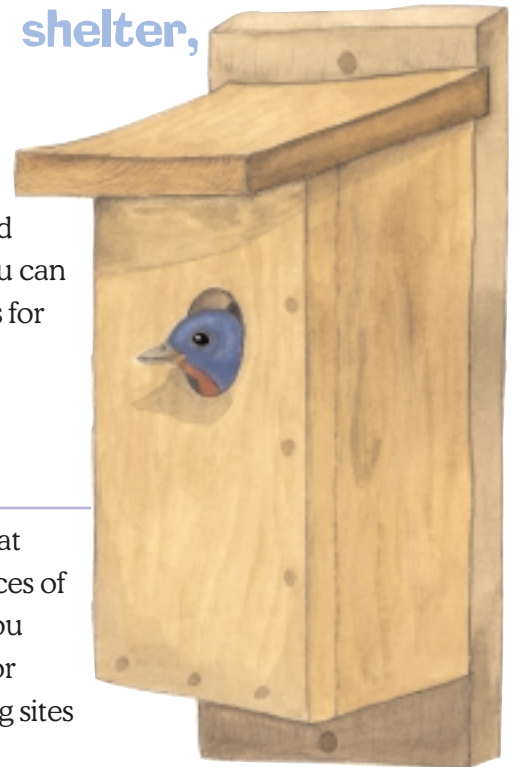
Where do you think you might see a hawk soaring overhead, a squirrel building its nest, and a woodpecker drilling for insects?

- a. In the country where a woodland meets a field
- b. Along a mountain stream
- c. In a city neighborhood

If you chose all three, you're right. But if you didn't choose "c," you're probably not alone. People often forget how many species of wildlife can co-exist with humans in an urban setting. In some cases, humans have moved into animals' territories. Maybe as often, animals have moved into ours. Wildlife can live anywhere they find suitable habitat to fulfill

their four basic needs—food, water, shelter, and a place to raise young. Certain wildlife species even prefer the same habitats as humans. Can you name some examples? We sometimes have problems living together, but it generally is considered smart for us to make room for native wildlife outside our homes and in our communities. With observation and careful planning, you can create great habitats for wildlife in an urban environment.

food, water, shelter, & a place to raise young



Trailblazing

To provide the best habitat for wildlife, first determine what piece of the habitat needs improvement. Are there enough sources of food, water, and cover? Make a map of your neighborhood so you can pinpoint areas where key habitat components are absent. For example, if you hope to attract bluebirds to your city park, nesting sites must be present. Bluebirds nest in holes in standing dead trees.



If no natural cavities exist, you will need to provide nesting boxes to attract bluebirds.



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a place to
raise young

The quantity and quality of habitat components will determine the carrying capacity, or how many healthy animals an area can support. For example, more families of bluebirds will be present in a habitat that has many nesting cavities than in an area with few or no nesting sites.



1. Walk through your neighborhood and record, or survey, types of wildlife present. Use field guides to help identify any unfamiliar species. Conduct surveys at different times of the day so you can observe various wildlife species when they are most active. **Make a map of existing vegetation and identify areas where food and cover are limited or abundant.** What would you recommend to improve the habitat for the existing species? Create a new map of the area that suggests improvements.

2. Implement your recommended changes. If possible, take “before” and “after” pictures of your urban habitat, and continue to observe and record wildlife species and behavior.

hummingbird feeders,
suet blocks, seed feeders,
fruit, peanut butter balls,
dried ears of corn...



Field Guide

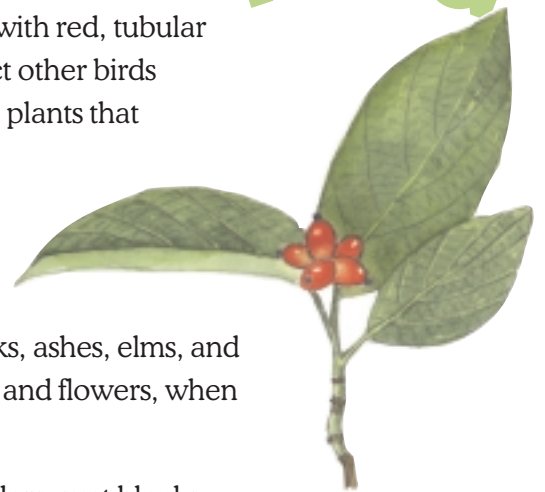
■ **Food.** The more types of **plant life** you include in your neighborhood or back yard, the greater diversity of wildlife you’ll attract.

In the warm months, annual and perennial wildflowers produce **nectar**, which is the main food source for butterflies, bees, and other insects. Vines with red, tubular flowers attract hummingbirds, and vines producing fruit may attract other birds or mammals. Visit your county’s Extension center for a list of native plants that will grow in your area.

Don’t forget to include or leave **grasses, shrubs, and trees** that provide food in fall and winter. Dogwood, persimmon, holly, redcedar, sassafras, sumac, and berry bushes are good sources of fruits, many of which feed wildlife throughout the winter. Pines, oaks, ashes, elms, and maples produce seeds eaten by many birds and mammals. Grasses and flowers, when left to seed, also provide food through the cold months.

Bird feeders can supplement natural foods. Hummingbird feeders, suet blocks, seed feeders, fruit, peanut butter balls, and dried ears of corn will attract birds, squirrels, raccoons, and other small mammals. Birds begin to rely on food in bird feeders during winter, so if you begin supplemental feeding in the fall, you must continue through the following spring.

food



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make a simple birdbath



■ **Water.** Clean water is equally important. Look for **existing water sources**, such as land depressions that hold water for long periods, flat roofs with depressions, or springs, creeks, and streams. You can make a simple birdbath with a trash can lid, a shallow pan, or the base to a flower pot.

water

Suggested Reading

- Coe, James. *Eastern Birds: A Guide to Field Identification of North American Species*. New York: Golden Press. 1994.
- Landry, Sarah. *Peterson First Guide to Urban Wildlife*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1994.
- Rezendes, Paul. *Tracking and the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks and Signs*. Charlotte, Vt.: Camden House Publishing. 1992.
- Whitaker, John, Jr. *The National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1980.

To make your homemade birdbath accessible to ground-feeding birds, use rocks or bricks to raise it a few inches off the ground. **Clean the containers regularly and fill them with fresh water every day or two.** A small heater can keep water thawed in harsh weather. A small in-ground pond provides habitat for amphibians as well as water for other wildlife.

don't forget the shelter

■ **Cover** (Shelter and Nesting Sites). Wildlife will not use feeding areas unless there is sufficient cover nearby. Dense **vegetation** allows birds to escape from predators and build nests. Rabbits also like to hide in dense, low shrubs. Various native shrubs, trees, and vines generally provide adequate shelter during warmer months. **As the temperature drops, evergreen trees, such as pines and redcedars, are important.** Trees with large, hollow cavities are ideal resting and nesting sites for many birds and mammals, such as squirrels, raccoons, opossums, and bats. In the absence of natural cavities, nest boxes can be used to attract these animals.



Refer to the 4-H wildlife project "Bird Furniture" for ideas on constructing feeding stations and nest boxes.

When setting up an urban habitat, place nest boxes, feeding stations, and watering structures in areas most inaccessible to unnatural predators like free-roaming house pets. Also consider hazards like roads and traffic.

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The Extra Mile

Conduct a predator survey in your urban habitat. During a 3-hour period, count all the dogs and cats roaming loose in your neighborhood. Record each animal's location, health, and estimated age, and whether it has a collar. Place all this information into a well-organized table, and answer the following questions:

- What type of animal is most often seen roaming in your neighborhood?
- How many of these animals have collars, suggesting that they have owners?
- Did you observe any of these animals stalking or eating wildlife?
- Does your city have a leash law? If so, what does it specify?
- Do any people you know let their pets roam unattended? Why?
- What can you recommend to help combat domestic pet predation on wildlife?



help combat
domestic pet
predation
on wildlife



Field Notes

share

- What did you observe before improving your habitat? After?
- What unexpected problems did you encounter?

process

- What species of urban wildlife can cause problems? What are these problems, and how can they be avoided or corrected?
- How are non-native, or exotic, plants or animals introduced into local wildlife habitats? What types of problems arrive with the introduction of non-native species? What common non-native species do you see in your habitats?
- In what ways do humans "invite" wildlife to move in, whether on purpose or unintentionally?

generalize

- How can having a variety of wildlife enhance our lives?
- In what other situations have you had to determine the pros and cons of an issue?

apply

- How can understanding natural connections and relationships help you think about and solve other kinds of problems?