

VBH BOT FYI Wildlife

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Zoo tracking rural wildlife's move into the city

By William Mullen, Chicago Tribune reporter  
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After setting up a "camera trap" in a grove of trees not far from Roosevelt Road, Alison Willingham and Seth Magle were returning to their car at a hotel parking lot in DuPage County when they drew the attention of curious hotel workers.

They explained they were biologists at Lincoln Park Zoo's Urban Wildlife Institute, beginning a survey of what sort of wildlife is migrating into the Chicago region – and where.

"Well, you came to the right place," one of the hotel employees said. "We've got a whole family of coyotes that have been hanging around and raising their pups under those trees over there the past couple of years."

The biologists were not surprised. Scientists just now are beginning to understand the appearance of all manner of wildlife in suburban and city backyards over the past two decades, from skunks, raccoons and opossums to deer, fox and coyote. Having found plenty of food and living space, the animals quickly have adapted from country cousins to city slickers.

With the goal of preventing conflicts between those critters and humans, the institute's biologists will install 112 cameras in the next couple of weeks along three known wildlife routes into the city and the suburbs – the Des Plaines River, the Illinois and Michigan Canal, and Roosevelt Road. Next year, they will add more cameras along the Chicago River and Bishop Ford Freeway.

Using the motion-activated, infrared cameras, they plan to record what wildlife is entering the urban area over the next five years to help them devise effective, nonlethal ways of managing it.

The problem is not unknown to the zoo itself, where visitors like coyote, fox and raccoons now show up and pose enough of a threat that the flamingos and Egyptian geese must be locked indoors overnight.

Urban wildlife now is a national phenomenon, said Eric Lonsdorf, director of the institute, which was founded 1 1/2 years ago with the aim of using Chicago as a model for other urban areas dealing with the problem. Among the institute's tasks is monitoring diseases that can be passed from animals to humans, such as West Nile virus, rabies and avian influenza.

The big concern, however, is to figure out more effective ways of controlling and coexisting with wildlife. Cities and suburbs across the country have tried capturing, relocating and killing raccoons, skunks and coyote, but those methods simply don't work, researchers believe.

"As our information comes in and our experience in the area grows, we'll be interacting with policymakers and urban planners," said Lonsdorf, "and working with the zoo's education department with ideas that could help homeowners faced with wildlife problems."

The camera traps were successfully tested for three weeks last fall. Thirty of them were set up in "green" areas – forest preserves, parks, cemeteries and golf courses – in Lake, DuPage and Cook counties.

They produced thousands of photos that offered a glimpse of which species are most prevalent alongside humans: 88 percent of the cameras captured raccoons; 75 percent coyotes, 67 percent opossum, 58 percent deer, 29 percent skunks, and 17 percent red fox.

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Until recently, surprisingly little large-scale research has been done on the urban wildlife phenomenon. Much of what is known has come from Ohio State University wildlife biologist Stan Gehrt in his "Cook County Coyote Project" for the [Cook] county Forest Preserve District.

The county project has been radio-tracking coyotes since 2000. Gehrt estimates there are now 2,000 or more coyotes in the Chicago region. They are among a number of wild species that were seldom if ever seen in urban areas during most of the 20th century but began showing up in the late 1980s, he said.

"It wasn't just in the Chicago region," he said. "It was pretty much simultaneous all over the country, wild critters started coming into cities. Coyote, which aren't even native to eastern states, were showing up in downtown Boston and Washington, D.C. Pretty much the only place they didn't move into was New York City, but they've been showing up there too recently. We still haven't figured out why."

It was Gehrt's research, Lonsdorf said, that in part inspired the zoo to create the institute, funded with a \$1.5 million Davee Foundation grant for six years.

Already working with the University of Illinois at Chicago and Roosevelt University on a regionwide census of bees, the institute plans to collaborate with Gehrt and other scientists engaged in urban studies.

"We are making sure that we aren't duplicating anybody else's research efforts and are not stepping on anyone's toes," said Lonsdorf. "Lincoln Park Zoo has been doing a lot of high-profile conservation work nationally and internationally, but I think the institute represents the zoo's desire to be a big conservation force in the Chicago area, too."

The zoo's own wild animal headaches started with eastern cottontail rabbits that in recent years swarmed there, eating and destroying expensive ornamental plantings. The bunnies also are the equivalent of blinking "Good Eats" neon signs that attract hungry coyote and fox.

"We see a lot of coyotes," said Victoria Hunt, an institute biologist who has installed the camera traps on zoo grounds. "People in the neighborhood report seeing coyotes to us all the time, and we find the carcasses of small mammals they have (eaten) scattered around the zoo."

Hunt's job is to figure out strategies and methods of ridding the zoo of the unwanted guests without capturing or killing them. Whatever the zoo eventually does should be useful for homeowners faced with the same conflicts, she said.

"It is all part of understanding the ecology of where you live," Hunt said.

She is devising nonlethal methods to get the rabbits to abandon the zoo, including repellent odors to drive them away and barriers to block them from their favored plant food.

"People have to be aware of how to not attract undesirable wildlife to their neighborhoods," Hunt said. "They have to get used to not leaving food out on their decks and backyards for their pets, for instance, and to stop letting their cats roam around at night."

"If these critters can't find food in your neighborhood, they aren't going to stay there."

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