

Wildlife Encounters

Wildlife watching is a growing activity among adults and youth. University of Florida has a lot of information to help residents learn about local creatures, both wanted and unwanted.

Florida wildlife faces many challenges, but the greatest impact is from habitat loss and fragmentation. As we build our houses in areas that are also homes for wildlife, we find more wildlife encounters at this wildland/urban interface (WUI). News of bear encounters has become more frequent in Central Florida, but there are many other species that are also being impacted by our growth patterns. Habitat loss occurs when trees and shrubs are removed through growth and development. New roads and highways change the topography and travel pathways for large and small wildlife. Permanent walls also fragment or separate areas that wildlife may have traditionally had access to for foraging for food or for finding a mate. Soil disturbance in the development process changes water flow, soil characteristics and plant communities that provide food and shelter for wildlife, including resting and nesting areas. In addition, urban development contributes to the spread of invasive exotic species as landscape plants escape from backyard gardens by seeds and runners and pets either roam wild or are released into the wild. Native animals now have more competition for food and space because of the spread of invasive species. Urban development usually includes fire suppression in woodlands to protect our human dwellings, but this may also hinder the natural processes of forest regeneration that some native plant and animal species depend on. As you can tell, there are many issues that impact wildlife habitat and diversity in our area.

We need homes and so do our wild neighbors, so what can you do to help?

Ranchers, farmers and forest landowners can manage property to increase wildlife habitat and encourage natural species diversity. This can provide wildlife viewing opportunities for fun and profit! You may be interested in the University of Florida book, [Your Backyard Woods and Wildlife, a Handbook for Florida Landowners](#), by edited by Demers, et al. The book is available for sale from the UF IFAS Bookstore at <http://ifasbooks.ifas.ufl.edu/> or call toll free 800-226-1764.

Land planners, developers and building contractors can develop new communities with wildlife and wildfire in mind. It takes planning and an understanding of wildlife needs as well as human needs. University of Florida's Program for Resource Efficient Communities (PREC) offers continuing education programs for professionals (planners, architects, engineers, landscape architects, and contractors) to help them understand solutions to minimize environmental impacts in the construction process. Contact me for more information on this or other professional continuing education programs.

Homeowners can increase wildlife habitat in individual yards and in neighborhoods and create corridors to connect development to nearby natural communities. A good reference, "Landscaping Backyards for Wildlife: Top Ten Tips for Success", is available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdffiles/UW/UW17500.pdf> or contact me for a print copy. Landscaping for Florida's Wildlife is a softcover book available for sale from the UF IFAS Bookstore.

Some wildlife such as squirrels are fun to watch, but may become a nuisance at bird feeders. Armadillos may dig up lawns, raccoons turn over garbage cans and coyotes are known to feed on outdoor cats. If you are having nuisance wildlife issues, first identify the animal causing the concern. Learn about their natural behaviors. Changing your patterns may reduce some of the problem encounters. For example, stop feeding wild birds for a week or so. Don't leave pet food outside. Secure garbage cans. Keep cats and small dogs indoors or walk them on a leash. Contact the Master Gardeners in the Plant Clinic at the UF IFAS Extension Office for more hints on dealing with problem animals in your yard.

If you want to learn more about our native animals and natural plant communities, Cindy Rutherford (crut@ufl.edu) in our office to sign up for a Woods Walk or for upcoming Florida Master Naturalist classes. Get involved in helping wildlife by removing invasive air potatoes in our natural areas along Shingle Creek. Youth and adult volunteers are needed at the upcoming 2015 Air Potato Mega-Raid, January 24, 2015. Call or register online at <http://2015airpotato.eventbrite.com>.