HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

WILDLIFE REHABILITATION

More houses and more people mean less natural habitat for some wildlife but new homes for others. Wildlife living in close proximity to people means more wildlife encounters.

As we develop the natural landscape, our homes, our pets and our cars put native animals at risk for injury. Do your part to minimize the damage.

Our homes can be hazardous to wildlife. Window films with reflective coatings interfere with bird flight patterns resulting in thousands of deaths and injuries each year. There are other energy efficient window alternatives to minimize wildlife injury. You can try placing the silhouette of a diving hawk on the window to scare birds from the area. We have patterns that may be helpful.

Our homes can invite wildlife into dangerous situations. As seen in the recent cartoon movie Over the Hedge, pet doors allow more than pets to enter your home. The onscreen havoc pales in comparison to some real life adventures I have heard of when skunks and raccoons also learn to use the pet doors to gain access to your home, for their food and shelter. If you are considering this as a convenience option for your pet, perhaps you could limit the access to only the storage room or the garage, not the entire house.

Wildlife encounters may be fatal for animals as well as humans when they involve roads. We read signs and change locations when detour routes are posted but it is hard to train the animals to change their travel paths when roads are built. Cars have overturned when they hit a wild pig on the road since they are small enough to get under the vehicle frame. This is bad news for car, driver and the pig. Evasive maneuvers to avoid injuring wildlife on the road can also be dangerous as portrayed in car insurance commercials.

Wildlife crossing signs warn us to slow down in areas known to be animal travel corridors, but may not be adequate to reduce wildlife or human deaths. The town of Harmony and Florida Department of Transportation installed a very expensive underpass on Highway 192. The crossing reduces accidents, but at the same time, provides for wildlife movement. Hopefully, new developments will also consider this option as a safety feature for residents, not just an expense, as we develop more of our rural lands that are currently providing habitat for deer, bobcats, panthers and bears.

Wildlife rehabbers, those licensed to care for injured wildlife, provide several other suggestions to reduce animal injuries as we continue to expand our territory:

Check lawns and grass fields for nests before mowing high grass. This is especially important in the spring when rabbits and birds are nesting. Check for active nests before pruning tree limbs and dense shrubbery. Leave some dead trees as homes for cavity nesting wildlife.

Keep pets and their food indoors. It is safer for them since they will not be exposed to diseases that they can catch from wild animals.

Dispose of litter properly and clean up litter in natural areas. Litter can be mistaken for food and cause digestive problems.

Don't feed wildlife. It is against the law and it is not good for the animals or those that enjoy them. A neighbor’s porch was destroyed by an otter that had gotten used to eating bacon. Locals have had cars and homes damaged by the powerful pecking of sandhill cranes looking for another handout.

Wildlife needs to forage or find the best foods for their bodies and our diets may alter their nutritional intake making them more likely to get sick. It also changes the animal's behavior and puts them at more risk of injury by humans and our pets. Feeding songbirds to supplement their diet is popular but be sure to keep feeders and birdbaths clean to prevent disease. Wear gloves so you don't get germs that can make you sick.
Cap chimneys to keep birds and wildlife from moving in and becoming a nuisance.

Don’t try to keep wild animals for pets and use special care with injured or orphaned wildlife. The best policy is often to do nothing and let the animals care for themselves. If you want to help injured or orphaned wildlife, support licensed trained wildlife rehabilitators. They need volunteers and donations of feed, blankets and money to pay for veterinary services. Contact our office for names of local rehabbers and a free handout on caring for injured or orphaned wildlife.

Take a walk on the wild side and see nature in action. Walks in natural areas provide an opportunity to better understand wildlife behavior and the animal’s connection to the ecosystem. Though you may not always see animals and birds, you can learn to look for evidence of their presence and find out why they occur in some areas and not in others.

The next scheduled free Woods Walk is Wednesday, November 28, 2006 at Lake Lizzie Preserve. The 2½ to 3 hour guided interpretive walk on the newly marked North Loop Trail will introduce participants to sand pine scrub, wet prairie, flatwoods and lakeshore plant communities. I will be accompanied by Pete Durnell, board member of the Florida Trail Association. Contact Cindy Rutherford at crut@osceola.org or call 321-697-3000 to get information on this and future walks and to find out the time and place to meet.

Eleanor Foerste
Natural Resources Agent
Osceola County Extension/University of Florida
1921 Kissimmee Valley Lane
Kissimmee, FL 34744
(321) 697-3000
Fax (321) 697-3010
efoe@osceola.org
osceola.ifas.ufl.edu
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