

The New Rules for Urban Living

We began our history in this country as trailblazers, ranchers, farmers, and homesteaders. In the early times, we understood that we shared our land with wildlife and accordingly practiced caution; we learned how to peacefully coexist with nature. Over the last couple of centuries, we have clear-cut the forests, dammed the rivers, tunneled through the mountains, reclaimed the dessert and paved our cities. We have driven wildlife out of our concrete jungles and into the remaining wilderness to the point that, finally, the wilderness is full. Now, wildlife is adapting to our cities, just as we adapted, in the beginning, to the wilderness. The major difference is that we change the landscape to meet our needs and animals modify their behaviors to work within the landscape and our rules.

- Deer are born in the medians of interstate highways.
- Foxes den in culverts under our driveways.
- Coyotes den in the manmade hillsides that are created during large land developments.
- Opossums sleep in the attic.
- Snakes warm themselves on our sidewalk.
- Chimney swifts, well you guessed it.

We would do well to learn from wildlife when it comes to survival.

Seventy five years ago, we never would have allowed our children to go walking in the woods without a weapon or adult supervision for defense against a bear or mountain lion or wolf. Our pets knew not to roam away from our homes because there were predators out there. Now, with concrete sidewalks, skyscrapers, fences and 24 hour a day lighting, we have become complacent. We have forgotten that wildlife exists in spite of our efforts to eliminate it. The fact is that these animals will always adapt in spite of our trapping and poisoning or our walls and fences. In an urban setting, it is not unusual to see deer, coyote, fox, raccoon, opossum, bobcat, skunk, armadillo, flying squirrels, snakes, turtles, beaver and countless species of birds.

- When we cut down the trees that provide them with shelter, they learn to adapt by using the structures that we build in place of the trees.

- When we bury or divert their water supply, they adapt by moving into our storm drains or using our man made water features.

- When we destroy their natural food sources, they adapt by eating our gardens, our pet's food or our pets. None of this is surprising. Given man's destruction of natural habitat, we must expect that these adaptable creatures will use what we have left for them. If we build it, they will come. Coyotes, foxes, snakes and other predators have also come to take advantage of the smorgasbord or prey animals we have invited. With prey comes predator, and that is how nature works. We must now adapt, rather than manipulate. With adaptation comes new rules. Trapping/Tranquilizing and Relocating Virtually all wildlife biologists agree, and scientific studies conclude, that (1) urban wildlife is here to stay, and (2) our best course of action is to learn peaceful coexistence. Trapping is not an option for many reasons: There is no habitat left to which they may be relocated. Relocated wildlife has less than a 15% chance for survival. Relocation is a biologically unsound practice due to the possibility of cross transmission of disease from one habitat to another and also because there is not sufficient data or manpower to determine the most suitable areas in which to relocate. Relocation of any species will have a cascading effect on the balance of other species within the habitat. If you remove a predator, its prey will flourish. Remove coyotes or foxes, and you will see an abundance of rats, mice, rabbits and feral cats. Trapping of most wildlife only compounds the perceived problem because the remaining members of that species will over breed to compensate for the gap created by trapping. This results in an increase in the population. Also, the male members of the species from neighboring home ranges will aggressively compete to take over the spot left vacant. Trapping by tranquilization is not an option unless the animal is confined or in special cases of a dangerous animal that must be tranquilized and then tracked until captured. The liability of tranquilizing is too great to risk an errant dart getting into the wrong hands and causing injury or death or if the animal is a game species, there is a potential for humans eating contaminated meat. We removed the wolf and now the coyote and fox flourish. We have to learn that it is we who must adjust to nature, not nature to us? -Michael Ellis, Director Atlanta Wild Animal Rescue Effort (AWARE)