

WILDLIFE HABITAT AND BEYOND

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Living in a rural setting affords opportunities that living in more urban settings may not, like the ability to see more wildlife right in your own backyard. Wildlife has basic needs like food, water, cover, and space that make up its habitat. Providing natural and healthy habitat on your property is a good way to increase the diversity of wildlife that you see. But there are several important things to consider about wildlife when you live in a rural area.

Changing Homeowner Impacts

Before beginning any enhancement to your property that might attract more wildlife, it is necessary to take stock of the things that are already occurring on your property. How you are currently using the land has significant consequences for wildlife. The most important factor for wildlife is the presence of habitat. If your property has sparse or nonnative vegetation, possibly due to poor soils or livestock grazing, it will not be able to support wildlife. In addition, domestic pets can affect wildlife. Outdoor cats can have serious negative impacts on bird, small mammal, and reptile populations. Domestic pets can be very damaging to native wildlife and require that you be diligent in your pet care and supervision. For example, fence off a part of your yard for dogs instead of letting them run free. Cats should be kept indoors at all times or at least have a bib to reduce the wildlife they stalk and kill.

Homeowner Tradeoffs

You must consider the tradeoff that occurs when you invite wild animals onto your property. You may get unwanted visitors. Even the animals you are interested in seeing may not always be the most courteous guests. For example, increasing the amount of native vegetation may attract more rabbits or quail. But in turn, those rabbits and quail may attract predators that may not see any difference between your pet and their next meal. In fact, domestic dogs and cats have become known as “coyote food” in some areas. In addition, as you make



ELISSA OSTERGAARD

Anti-hunting cat bib.

changes to increase wildlife viewing opportunities, you may also be increasing the amount of insects. Because insects are an important food source for many wildlife species, being more tolerant of insects will increase your ability to see wildlife.

It is also important to know that some wildlife can carry diseases that may be transmitted to humans. Never approach or attempt to capture wild animals, especially if they appear sick or injured. While seeing more wildlife is a wonderful benefit to living in rural areas, it also comes with a responsibility to understand the nature of wildlife.

Property Inventory

Consider the resources you already have to offer on your property. A proper inventory of the resources currently available will help you decide what habitat is already provided and what you may want to modify. For instance, what is the

major vegetation type represented on your property? Whether you live in a forest, woodland, grassland or desert vegetation type determines what kinds of wildlife you can attract. Are there any water sources on your property? What kinds of soils are present? Once you have a complete inventory, you can better understand what types of wildlife will use those resources and if those are the types of wild animals you are interested in attracting.

Keeping Wildlife Wild

In order to keep wildlife from becoming pests, homeowners should not feed most wildlife. Leaving food out for wildlife is dangerous because it can attract the wrong kind of animals and also may habituate them to humans. Supplemental feeding of wildlife is not only detrimental to the animals, but is also a crime in some Arizona counties. The No Feeding Wildlife Law is now in effect for Pima and Maricopa counties and makes it unlawful to feed wildlife, except birds and tree squirrels. Wildlife that becomes a pest can be removed from your property, but keep in mind that most animals that are moved from one area to another do not survive. To safely attract birds and yet discourage unwanted wildlife, regularly clean your bird feeding area and water features; if feeding birds near your home, put bird feeders in a fenced area; and make sure your garbage is secure at all times.

In addition, it is important to not approach or handle wildlife that seems injured or sick until you have called a wildlife rehabilitator or the Arizona Game and Fish Department. These professionals will be able to tell you if you should intervene depending on the species and how the animal is behaving. There are some young animals, like birds, that may appear

to have been abandoned, but in most instances this is not the case. Moving a baby bird may orphan it unnecessarily. So get a professional's opinion about what to do if you see an animal that is sick, injured, or appears to have been abandoned before you do anything. For a list of licensed wildlife rehabilitators go to azgfd.gov/w_c/urban_rehab_relo.shtml or call your local Arizona Game and Fish Department office.

Adjacent Land Uses

One last thing to consider is how the land adjacent to your property is being used. If you are surrounded on all sides by other private land owners, you may be able to work with neighbors to increase the space you can offer to native vegetation (thereby attracting more native wildlife). If there are agricultural fields or ranching operations next to your property, keep in mind that attracting some animals may have negative consequences for them. Wildlife are not going to stay on your property alone. Small rodents may wander over to crop fields and can do real damage while larger predators may prey on livestock. In addition, be aware that your property is part of a watershed. Removing too much vegetation from your property can increase erosion, leading to loss of soil and nutrients and decreased infiltration.

Seeing more wildlife on your property can be a source of great joy and learning experiences for rural homeowners. Being mindful of the tradeoffs of having more wildlife around, being responsible about your pets, landscaping, and garbage, and recognizing adjacent land uses will increase your enjoyment of wildlife and decrease the amount of surprises you find later on.



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