

Meet Your New Neighbors



More deer, bears, and mountain lions are venturing into Montana's cities, towns, and suburbs, causing problems and even endangering human life

BY SAM CURTIS

THE WAY GRAHAM TAYLOR describes it, the situation might have been in urban Maryland or suburban Connecticut. "The deer were everywhere," says FWP's north-central region wildlife manager. "They were on people's decks. They were in parking lots and on the schoolyard. People told us stories of swatting deer with brooms to get them to move away. One afternoon we counted over 380 deer within the city limits."

But it wasn't some East Coast suburb enduring the deer infestation. It was Fort Benton, a small town along the Missouri River 30 miles northeast of Great Falls.

And as in cities, towns, and suburbs across the country where deer numbers have grown too high, efforts to reduce the Fort

Benton deer population pitted citizen against citizen. Many residents, tired of their shrubs being nibbled down to nubs, demanded deer removal. Yet others encouraged the animals to stay, either by purposely putting out food or inadvertently leaving bird feeders where deer could reach the seeds. When city officials and FWP proposed a plan to shoot deer to

reduce the growing population, some people were horrified.

"One woman had the same doe deliver twin fawns under her trampoline for two years running," says Taylor. "She was pretty upset that we might actually kill that deer. So, we definitely had split public feelings about the deer situation."

Nuisance wildlife in Montana towns is nothing new. In recent years, however, the problem has worsened. Vehicle collisions with deer are growing, and FWP's regional offices report more and more nuisance wildlife complaints over the past decade.

"The volume of calls I get on black bears in the Flathead Valley has been increasing by 10 to 15 percent annually," says Erik Wenum, FWP bear specialist in Kalispell. "It's now running at between 800 and 1,000 calls each year."

In part, growing wildlife woes are due to increases in both human and wildlife populations, which have made more interaction inevitable. But the main reason for increased conflicts, say FWP officials, has been growing development outside city limits. "The newly developed areas are historic wildlife habitats transformed from open space into subdivisions," says Mike Korn, FWP area coordinator in Helena. "We see a direct correlation between the deer we have in town and development along the fringe. As animals find irrigated plants in suburban landscaping, they basi-



NORMAN JACOBSON

BIG "BIRDS" Homeowners often inadvertently attract deer by placing bird feeders in places the resourceful animals can easily reach.



RODNEY SCHLECT
GARY LEPPART

RURAL RENEWAL Pronghorns watch as their grassland habitat becomes someone's backyard. A mule deer buck sits nonplussed as a family walks past on an urban trail. Biologists say that increasing wildlife problems aren't caused so much by animals coming into town as they are by towns moving out to the animals' historic home territories.



cally follow a trail right into town.”

Wenum sees a similar pattern causing increased conflicts between people and bears in the Flathead Valley. “It’s not so much that bears are coming farther into Kalispell,” he says. “It’s that Kalispell is moving farther out toward prime bear habitat.”

SMALL NUISANCES

Most nuisance wildlife complaints that reach FWP concern small critters: pack rats in the attic, bats in the chimney, skunks under porches. Because such unprotected species are not managed by the department, FWP staff refer these calls to the local city animal control office or to pest control companies. They also suggest places to purchase live traps and will mail out brochures that offer advice on solving the problem.

For example, tinsel, reflective tape, or owl models can keep starlings and pigeons from roosting on buildings. Live trapping and releasing will work on some animals such as squirrels. And, if no local ordinances prevent it, a homeowner can shoot a problem skunk, raccoon, or other unprotected animal.

But when someone is having problems with protected species such as ducks or geese, FWP cannot encourage people to take matters into their own hands. Waterfowl are a particularly vexing problem for wildlife officials because the birds can be so numerous and their abundant excrement messes up yards, recreational areas, and

beaches. Yet ducks and geese cannot be harmed without federal permits, even by state wildlife officers. That leaves FWP staff with few options.

“When people continue to feed ducks and geese in town, suddenly we’ve got waterfowl waddling around on King Avenue and getting run over,” says Kevin Schaal, FWP warden sergeant in Billings.

DANGEROUS THREATS

A public nuisance is one thing, but a threat to public safety is something altogether dif-

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—MIKE KORN,
FWP Helena Area Coordinator

ferent. So when someone calls FWP and says a bear, mountain lion, or moose has been sighted in an urban area, the response is immediate.

“If we get calls about bears or lions, we respond as quickly as possible to remove them with either a bear trap, dogs, or tranquilizers,” says John Firebaugh, FWP

regional wildlife manager in Missoula. Because they are so large and potentially dangerous, moose also command quick attention from department staff.

The problem of dangerous wildlife entering urban areas is statewide and growing. Moose wander into Butte, Whitefish, and Billings. Bears have been seen in Bozeman, Missoula, Helena, and Kalispell. “We’re getting more and more lion sightings all around the Billings area,” says Schaal. Mountain lions are also showing up in Helena and Missoula.

Attracted by succulent edibles, especially in dry years, moose move into towns along natural drainages and linear greenways. When natural foods such as huckleberries are scarce, “bears end up in town looking for fruit, bird seed, garbage, and dog food,” says Wenum.

Mountain lions, however, are after live prey. “Lions are looking for a dog, a cat, a deer, or even a person,” Wenum says. “The potential for a public safety risk is very high with a lion.”

Food is the big attractant for most dangerous wildlife. Each spring, FWP uses press releases, pamphlets, and TV news spots to remind citizens living in bear country that they need to pull in the bird feeders, keep garbage secure, and feed their pets inside. Residents in mountain lion territory are urged to not feed deer, which in turn attract the large cats to urban areas.



TOM BAUER

DANIEL J. COX

DANGEROUS LIAISONS Mountain lions follow deer in on pets and pose serious threats to people. Black and and horse feed left outside. Equally dangerous moose divisions or hiking trails. Though wild animals can be the wildlife themselves, who increasingly find themself

HUNGRY DEER

Deer also cause major problems of their own. The beautiful and popular ungulates have now become the biggest urban wildlife issue in Montana.

“There’s a veritable delicatessen of things for deer to choose from in town,” says Gayle Joslin, FWP wildlife biologist in Helena. “And some people are purposely feeding them, even though there’s a law against it. We’ve now got generations of deer that have never lived outside a city.”

The hungry animals destroy flowers, shrubs, and gardens, like those of Helena resident Darlene Arnold. “I live right in the middle of town, and I’ve had up to 15 deer in my little condo court eating up everything and leaving my yard full of their manure,” she says.

Does raise fawns in people’s backyards. Bucks roam the streets and alleys like juvenile gangs. Deer are injured and killed in traffic accidents that damage vehicles and endanger human life. In 2003, roughly 300 deer were picked up as road kill in Missoula County alone. “Over the past decade or so, it’s been increasing every year,” says Max Bauer, general manager of BFI, Inc., a waste disposal company that picks up dead deer. Frightened deer have even been known to crash through windows into people’s homes.

Deer can also become aggressive. Joslin says a few years ago a mule deer attacked an elderly Helena woman walking from her car to her front door. “The deer came up and

tried to beat the daylight out of her with its front hooves,” says the biologist.

Yet many Montanans like to see deer in their yards and put out cracked corn and other food to attract the graceful animals. Kate Pope, who works in the Missoula mayor’s office, says even people who know deer cause problems still don’t want to see the animals harmed or removed.

“That definitely puts us in a tough position,” she says.

REMOVAL OPTIONS

Options for controlling urban deer are limited. Contraceptives aren’t practical. “It’s difficult to get a contraceptive into a doe without injuring or killing her,” says Joslin. “And once you do, if that animal is shot by a hunter and the meat is consumed, you’ve got a food health issue.”

And relocating deer is neither humane nor fair. “Aside from being hugely expensive,” explains Joslin, “trap-and-transfer is just a way of sweeping the problem under the rug. Those transplanted deer, dumped out there in competition with other deer, are not going to survive, or they will just end up causing problems for someone else.”

“I get calls from people saying, ‘We’ve got a bear problem. Come get *your* bear.’”


—ERIK WENUM,
FWP Bear Specialist



MASLOWSKI PHOTO

The most efficient way for FWP to curb wildlife population growth is with regulated hunting. But that usually won’t work in urban areas due to legal prohibitions and safety concerns. At the request of the Fort Benton City Council, FWP has in recent years used controlled, supervised public hunts on the outskirts of town, and selective shooting by department and city personnel within city limits, to remove mule deer from the growing urban population. But Fort Benton is a small town surrounded by open space. The state’s larger towns and cities are more densely populated and surrounded by suburbs, making controlled hunts difficult.

Ultimately, it may be Montana residents, not Montana wildlife, who need better management. “Reducing conflicts between people and wild animals will require controls on human actions,” writes David Baron in *The Beast in the Garden*, a new book on the often violent merger of wildlife and humankind. “People, especially those who live along the new frontier between



suburbs and rural developments, where they prey on bears find easy pickings in garbage, dog food, and find traditional wildlife routes converted to suburban to humans, the biggest tragedy is often to be on a collision course with human expansion.

W. STEVE SHERMAN

civilization and wildland, must accept that they are participants in the natural world, not mere observers.”

Korn points out that homeowner associations could enact and enforce covenants on fencing, landscaping, garbage storage, and wildlife feeding so that wild animals would pass through residential areas without being enticed to stay.

More education, says Wenum, may be the best way for rural residents to understand their new relationship with wildlife. “We’ve got to instill in people a better sense of ownership and responsibility,” he says. “I get a lot of calls from people saying, ‘We’ve got a bear problem. Come get *your* bear.’ They have to understand it’s not my bear, and it’s not FWP’s deer. The bear and deer are just as much theirs as anyone’s. And they should take some responsibility for those animals.”

Existing and future legislation may also aid in solving urban wildlife issues. Wenum believes long-standing laws against feeding wildlife need to be enforced more strictly.

And House Bill 249, passed by the 2003 Montana legislature, will now allow towns and cities to adopt plans and use their resources “to control, remove, and restrict game animals” within city limits, with the approval of FWP.

This year, a working group of wildlife experts and city officials from around the state is meeting in Billings, Helena, and other cities to discuss ways to solve urban wildlife issues. Options include special archery hunts to cull urban deer and finding new ways to convince citizens to lessen the attractiveness of their homes to potentially troublesome wildlife.

Who will pay for increased urban wildlife management in Montana? That’s another unresolved issue. Local governments have no authority to manage game animals, and they typically lack funds to reduce wildlife problems. Yet hunters don’t want FWP to use their license dollars to control wildlife within city limits. That’s especially true where subdivision expansion not only adds to the problem but also results in

fewer hunting opportunities on what were once rural lands.

Regardless of how urban wildlife is managed, some FWP officials worry that the growing number of nuisance wildlife incidents threatens the very idea and value of wild animals and wildness.

“As a wildlife biologist,” says Joslin, “I don’t want to see deer in town. I don’t want to see them lose their fear of people, become unwild, and then have people develop the attitude that they’re some type of vermin. That demeans wildlife and lessens the importance of these species and the wild places where they live.” 🐻

Montana FWP has produced a “Living with Wildlife” brochure series with tips on reducing problems caused by bears, deer, raccoons, beavers, porcupines, skunks, bats, ground squirrels, magpies, pigeons, starlings, and woodpeckers. For copies, call your nearest FWP regional office, or go to the FWP website, fwp.state.mt.us, and click the “Wild Things” icon.