

Living with your wild neighbors

By Mark Wheeler / Hi-Desert Star

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One irrevocable fact of community life in the rural desert is that the lands we develop for our uses are also inhabited and visited by a large number of other organisms claiming some use of those lands as well. What this means in terms of practical consequence is that, at best, we can only really expect to share the land with these other users. And, for good, bad or indifferent, these other users have some vastly different ideas from ours about how to make a living and about what makes a good living.

We call them the "wild" culture, and they include all the organisms and creatures which don't build their houses like we do or manage their affairs according to our rules of conduct.

Some of us welcome this culture in our midst, consider the presence of wild things a charming quality of our surroundings. Others feel somewhat differently. Regardless, however, where any of us might stand on the continuum between wild-neighbor-lover and wild-neighbor-hater, none of us can really escape the fact that we have wild neighbors and this, in turn, inspires a most practical need to know how best to get along with them.

Following is a list of recommendations taken from a variety of sources on the subject of living with specific wild neighbors. By and large, they all tend to call for some tolerance and understanding on the part of the human for the non-human counterpart and, for as easy as this might be dismissed as a biased point of view, it would be a mistake not to recognize that the very practical result in all cases is the prevention of nuisance or tragedy.

In an important sense, what works for the wild animal will also work in our favor. The only question is: Which of the two will take the initiative? The answer to that comes in the form of another question, though it's a purely rhetorical one. "Which of the two is the smartest."

Do not feed the wild animals

No single rule of living with wild animals is more repeated and emphasized than is this one. Though we may feel the most compassionate urge to intervene in the harsh routines of nature, study after study proves time and time again that feeding wild animals has punishing consequences, no matter how benevolently it is intended.

Consider the gentle bunny. We may love our wild-neighbor bunnies and may feed them with every good intention for their welfare. They learn our house is a refuge and make a

habit of stopping by each day. Soon there might be a small visiting committee of bunnies, and all the while we are taking pleasure in their trust of us, neighbor Jones, whose property the bunnies cross, hates the things and takes his pleasure of the bunnies by siccing his mutt on them or using them for pellet gun target practice.

Maybe we love the quail and throw seed out on the ground for them everyday. So busy watching the birds, we might miss the concurrent increase in rodents in the vicinity who are making a less conspicuous but satisfactory living on the seeds escaping quail attention. But then, we do see the coyotes that start hanging around because of the prey density. Worried for the birds, we call for sanctions against the predators. As for the "expletive-deleted" rodents which have inexplicably invaded our garden, we spread a little poison for them which inadvertently kills a few quail.

These examples are very simplistic, but the sorry fact of the matter is that the affects of our interferences in the affairs of wild animals aren't so simplistic. They aren't so easy to see. Mostly, the dynamics we set in motion by feeding wild animals are subtle, and we don't notice anything until a problem arises, or maybe until something dies.

Don't provide water sources

All the same rationale applies to water sources. They invite concentrations of animals, many of which are prey to other, perhaps less welcome predators. Whereas, for instance, we might revel in the refreshment we're providing for all the little creatures at our ground level, backyard water feature, we may react a little more homicidally against the rattlesnake that shows up for his or her share of the generosity, or who thinks this water hole might be a fertile hunting ground.

Incidentally, water attracts bees, and since arrival of the Africanized bee in southwest America, standing water sources here are a potential invitation to the bees' to set-up house nearby.

Roadrunners and hamburger balls

The Mojave Desert's own favorite comic, the roadrunner is actually a most accomplished predator with a reasonably quick wit. Many of the birds have learned humans are a good source of handouts, and though the admonitions against feeding wild animals in general apply to roadrunners as well, one particular handout item traditionally popular with humans has been proven to be particularly crippling to these birds.

Research has shown that nestlings fed on hamburger by their parents develop bone deformities. In order for them to develop anatomically, the young birds need nutrients such as calcium which is found in greater supply in prey foods.

Advisories stress that hamburger ball handouts should be suspended at least during the

spring when babies are hatching, and the best course of all is to stop feeding altogether.

Snakes

Rural desert living means occasional snake encounters. Water opportunities attract them, and so do concentrations of rodents. Eliminating invitations will help discourage snake visits, but another important step in living sensibly with the reptiles is to learn what tells a rattlesnake from the rest.

Generally speaking, any snake, including rattlesnakes, serves a good purpose by helping to balance a local rodent population. Nevertheless, rattlesnakes can create a hazard, and most people will want to remove them from the premises. Animal control services for both the county and for Yucca Valley are skilled in the task, but the prudent desert resident will strive to minimize invitations first and foremost. Don't keep debris piles on the property where snakes can hide, and pet dogs on the property will also tend to discourage snake visits.

Coyotes

Much has already been written about how best to live in harmony with the desert's wild dogs. For the most part, all advice focuses on not giving them opportunity for scavenging a living. Don't feed them; don't provide water for them. Keep trash covered and secure. If pets are present, fence the property and take additional common sense steps to keep them safe.

Small pets are especially attractive to any self-respecting predator, and it's important to know that not every pet disappearance is the fault of coyotes. Owls and hawks have even better opportunity to get at small pets than do coyotes, and their foraging assaults account for more small pet disappearances than most people realize.

Spring cleaning

This is the time of year most people do a little spring cleaning, meaning they are digging around in the dim corners and laying hand on the dark undersurfaces of their homes. These places are the favored hiding spots of black widows and desert recluses. It pays to illuminate the working area and perhaps to even wear light gloves. Clothing and bedding not recently used should also be shook out before first use.

We're the smart ones

Prevention of nuisance and predator incidents is the most sensible way to live peacefully with wild animals. Otherwise, we're just waiting for a problem to occur, and when it does, even though we may work our will in the end, we may suffer some unnecessary damage in the process.

Wild animals can be expected to follow their instincts for getting a living as easily as possible. This does not include, however, the rationality for visualizing the unintended consequences of their simple actions. That's something we're good at. We need to know which opportunities we don't want exploited, and then decide what we can do to make the opportunities less inviting.

"Wild Neighbors: The Humane Approach to Living with Wildlife," written by the Humane Society of the United States and published by Fulcrum Publishing, is an excellent source for advice on living with everything from bats to bobcats. The society's Web site address is www.hsus.org.