

WILDLIFE PROBLEMS IN URBAN AREAS

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The title of my talk today is wildlife problems in urban areas. First of all I've never been exactly sure what the definition of urban was. I've heard of rural, I've heard of the suburbs, and I've heard of the country, but I was never sure of what urban meant. I looked it up in Webster's and Webster's defines it very briefly as relating to, characteristic of, or constituting a city. Well the district that I'm in charge of in the Wildlife Protection branch of the Department of Fish and Game is just about as citified as is humanly possible in any location in the world.

We have a vast population in the Los Angeles basin. A solid concrete jungle that covers an area of 60 square miles. Fifty-nine percent of the population of the State of California resides in the Region 5; about 11 million people. This region is actually bigger than 23 other states in the union.

We have problems that, unless most people were confronted with the type of job we are in, would not have an awareness of these problems.

I supervise, in the counties of Los Angeles and Orange, approximately 20 wildlife protection people. I sometimes consider these people I supervise to be wild animals, but fortunately the public calls them game wardens.

Today I would like to elaborate on some of the types of animals that we have problems with and some of the curious and often humorous and interesting encounters that we have with these animals.

First of all, the types of animals that people in the Wildlife Society are probably thinking of are wild animals such as deer, bear, raccoon, etc. But also we have a lot of problems with exotic wild animals. Wild animals come into communities and damage agricultural crops in Los Angeles County, Orange County, Santa Barbara County, San Diego County, San Bernardino County and Riverside County. We issue permits for allowing these animals to be killed if they are actually doing damage or threat of damage and in those counties I just mentioned most of the damage is not to agricultural crops but to people's gardens. I don't have the figures for last year to separate it from the agricultural damage and the urban damage but a very high percentage of the permits that are issued are for urban damage. Here are the data for 1977 totals, and of course this is statewide, but it will give you some idea of the magnitude of this problem. On deer for example, there were 357 permits issued (depredation permits) and there were 441 deer killed. Actually this is a low year for deer damage because of the cycle of the deer population being in a lower ebb at this time. But from my background of experience when I was a warden up in Napa county about ten years ago, in one year we had 400 deer killed under the authority of deer depredation permits in that county alone. We have issued 23 permits for depredating mountain lions in the state. There were nine mountain lions killed last year. We have quite a problem in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. Every year there will be at least three lions that for some reason will come into town. Quite often they will crawl under a person's house. I would guess they're sick or want company; — who can explain it? Last year we had a mountain lion killed on the freeway out by Pasadena; it was a very large adult female mountain lion and did not appear to be a pet. It was crossing the freeway and was hit by a car. We also have a problem with bears coming into the urban areas and frightening people, similar to the problem in our parks system

with the bear doing damage by breaking into people's ice chests and destroying food left out over night on the picnic tables. There were 36 bear depredation permits issued and only six bear were killed. We do have a problem here and in other locations of the state where we try to live trap these bears, if possible, and then transport them to a more isolated area. Beehive damage also occurs on occasion, due to bears.

I've compiled a list of wild animals that we have encountered problems with in this area that normally one would not think of. (Appendix A). Starlings do damage to fruit crops and feed lots. At the airports they fly in front of jets that are taking off. Airplanes have crashed because of the large number of starlings that were injected into the intakes of the jet engines and actually cause the planes to crash.

The airports have problems with sea gulls flying in front of the planes. There are different techniques that have been used to cope with this problem. For example, specific poisons such as staricide are used for starlings. The most promising technique is herding with sound frightening techniques. Many of the airports have set up carbide guns which discharge periodically to scare the birds. Another technique is the call of starlings and sea gulls in distress played on a tape recorder over and over continuously which has the effect of scaring the birds off the runway.

Another interesting problem that you probably hadn't thought of is nesting swallows. In the spring we are diluged with calls from all over this area, particularly San Juan Capistrano, due to the problems of the swallows making their mud nest on the sides of buildings. If the calls aren't from someone who is complaining about the swallows building mud nests under the eaves of their house, it is a complaint from the bird watcher or the protectionist who is concerned because someone is destroying the swallow's nests — so we are caught right in the middle. We tell people that we will allow them to wash the nest off with a water hose as they are being built. If the nest is once built and the birds have established themselves in the nest, we will not allow anything to be done about it.

Another interesting thing is that we have a lot of raptors, even in the heavily populated areas. They seem to thrive on civilization. The problem we get into, aside from the illegal activities of the persons capturing these raptors, is with birds that escape from falconers. We get several calls a year where someone's poodle has been attacked. We never had a case where the bird actually carried the poodle off but quite often they will do serious damage to the dog and must be taken to a veterinarian. Last year we had two calls from citizens that had been attacked by raptors and actually sustained injury to their scalp. In both of these cases the persons reported that the bird had jesses on it, so it had to belong to a falconer that had lost control of the bird.

I hope all of you in the back could hear the recording I played of the coyotes howling and yipping because I made that recording last week on my patio in the backyard of my house — and I live in the city of Orange. The area is heavily populated, but it is at the edge of an island of undeveloped area. I don't think it is over a hundred acres. It is totally surrounded by community but there is still a population of coyotes that live there and they bark almost every night. We do have hundreds of complaints every year from citizens where coyotes will wander in and kill their cats and dogs. In Los Angeles and Orange counties our response to these complaints is that we are just very sorry because there are no programs to control depredating coyotes. Coyotes are another species of animal that thrive on civilization. Coyotes live right in the city of Los Angeles in Griffith Park. I see the coyotes frequently where I live.

Another problem we get into that you wouldn't think about is desert tortoises. I'll read a list later on of restricted species that we picked up last year. Tortoises are interesting and unique because they, like the coyotes, seem to thrive on our civilized situation in the southland. They reproduce vigorously. Our Department is actually licensing tortoises if a person possessed them before our laws went into effect about 10 years ago - restricting their being captured from the wild. Persons who already possessed tortoises were blanketed in. The law requires that we put a little license plate on these tortoises. We have a tremendous population of tortoises in Los Angeles, they quite often escape and wander down the street and someone else will find them and call us. If it does have a license or tag on it we will find out who the permit was issued to and return it.

We get many calls every year from parks and golf courses where they are having problems with coot depredation on their greens. The coots like green grass and they'll completely strip the greens and defecate all over. Almost 200 permits are issued each year to take these coots off the courses.

Feral wild pigs got into a golf course and have completely destroyed several of their greens. I inspected those greens and it looked like a large tractor had gone through and completely destroyed them. Each green costs approximately \$1100 to prepare.

Another problem we encounter quite often is woodpecker damage to dwellings where they get into the eaves and on the roof and begin pecking holes.

We even have had complaints in the Palm Springs area of bighorn sheep coming down into the communities and doing damage on the golf greens and to people's gardens. Most people like to see the bighorn sheep so we have never actually be requested to do anything about them.

Another problem that came up last year was rather curious. A lady's water main had broken under her house and she called a plumber to repair it. When he got under the house he was frightened by a snake that he thought was a rattlesnake. He ejected himself from the dwelling and absolutely refused to go back in the building. She was losing thousands of gallons of precious water and she started phoning different governmental agencies and was getting kicked off by everyone. She contacted federal, state and county agencies and local animal control people. She finally reached rock bottom and got the intrepid Wildlife Protection branch of the Department of Fish and Game. She asked if there was anything we could do as she was at her wits end. When she talked to me she was actually crying. I thought that we should do something inasmuch as the rattlesnakes do come under our jurisdiction now since they passed laws protecting all reptiles, including rattlesnakes, from being taken commercially in California. I contacted two wardens in that area and asked them if they would try to do something; not to put themselves in jeopardy but to see if they could help. They crawled under the house at great risk and found the snake. It was a simple garden variety of gopher snake and they were able to convince the plumber to go back in and repair the damage.

I had a pack rat get into my garage last year and I couldn't believe the damage it did. I was able to live trap it in about a week but it ate through files and chewed wires and did a lot more damage than any normal mouse or rat would do.

Another animal they have a lot of problem with in these areas are raccoons that damage people's gardens and get in the attic of their homes and frighten them.

The City of Los Angeles has established a rather unique service for persons having problems with wildlife. They've arranged for a contract with a helicopter service and each week the animal control people in Los Angeles bring the wild animals they've picked up during the week to a central location and the animals are flown back into different isolated areas and released. I obtained some rather interesting data from the city regarding what they call the "Animal Airlift Program". Since September 11, 1969 they have airlifted 2,043 raccoons, 939 opossums, 114 foxes, 25 hawks, 58 tortoises, 5 owls, 6 pheasants, 2 coyotes, 18 squirrels, 9 ducks, 4 rabbits, 2 bobcats and 69 non-venomous reptiles. The total being released to this date is 3,294 animals. We also pick up a number of these animals. I'll read the list of animals we picked up last year. (Appendix A) These animals are all released to the wild if possible.

An example of the type of complaints we receive regarding coyotes is a letter received from the Rancho Bernardino Golf Club in San Diego, It says,

Members of the Rancho Bernardino Golf Club and others whose homes are along the fairways of our golf course have asked the board of directors to formally request your cooperation in removing coyotes from these premises. Coyotes have increased to the extent that they now travel in packs of three or four. Their presence is invariably accompanied by reports of missing small pets or the presence of partial eaten cats and dogs; the remains of which are left on lawns or on the golf course.

Members of our club report they have contacted the humane society, North County animal shelter, the Department of Fish and Game and other agencies but have been advised that official action is extremely hard to obtain; partly because of the prohibition against the use of firearms in this area and somewhat due to the fact that environmental factors exert an influence on those holding political office.

Most of the people in the community support the concept of preserving our wildlife. If there is a means by which predatory animals can be removed from this area to a sanctuary where they will be harmless to any except their natural prey, we would recommend its use. If this cannot be accomplished, then more effective methods should be employed to remove the hazard.

We are conscious of the fact that coyotes rarely attack humans. We are fearful of the consequences that might be suffered should one of these animals become rabid, as they often do, and appear in an area where small children are present.

Since we are unable to take any form of direct action we must depend on you and any influence you may be able to use to bring this matter to a final and satisfactory disposition.

This is a typical type of complaint we receive and we are right in the middle. There are protectionists and environmentalists in our society that exert strong opposition to direct control of wild animals. Then we have the person on the other side of the fence that is having a problem with wild animals and would either like them removed or destroyed. Unfortunately, there is no happy answer.

A second aspect of problems with our wild animals that most wildlife managers or biologists do not think about are the problems associated with live exotic animals. The 1976 a state law was passed in California sponsored by Senator Peter Behr that put the responsibility, jurisdiction and control of exotic wild animals under the auspices of the Department of Fish and Game, Wildlife Protection Branch. The law requires that any person possessing an exotic wild animal be licensed by our agency. License cost 25 dollars and is good for a two-year period. Before the license is issued our officers inspect the facilities in which the animal will be enclosed to assure adequate size, that preparations are made for cleanliness and that there is a shelter for the animal so that it will be contained in a humane manner. They also check to see that the person is able to demonstrate some knowledge and ability to care for the animal and that he has made contact with a veterinarian that specifically has knowledge about the particular type of animal that this person desires to possess.

We estimate in Region 5 that we probably have at least 100,000 exotic wild animals that are possessed by private persons. Although we have made vigorous efforts in the last three years to make the public aware of the existence of this law, both through the newspaper and television media, we have actually issued only about 500 permits. The probable reason for this small response is that many of these animals are owned by persons living in communities that have passed ordinances which prohibit the possession of an exotic wild animal.

I would like to briefly tell you about some of the more humorous situations that we have encountered in working with the licensing of these exotic wild animals.

For example, one of our officers was investigating a request for a permit to possess an African lion and during this investigation the African lion jumped on him and proceeded to sink his jaws into his back and refused to get off. When the officer finally escaped, his uniform was torn off and he was quite severely abraded. He gained the nickname after that of "Bring Them Back Alive Bill McFarland" or otherwise affectionately known as "Bwauna Bill".

On another occasion our officers had tranquilized an African lion and were transporting it in the back of a station wagon. In the middle of the Los Angeles Freeway, one of the officers looked back and found that the lion was standing up and shaking his head. He said "Oh my God it's coming to". The traffic was so thick that the officer was unable to get out of the fast lane for a period of several minutes. When he got over to the side of the freeway they gave the lion a heavier dose of tranquilizer. The situation created a few frightening moments.

Time doesn't allow to tell any more of these situations. But in conclusion I would like to read to you a copy of a post card I received recently that demonstrates just how we are right in the middle; no matter what we do it's wrong. Our goal is to try and look out for the welfare of wild animals, but here is a card from a man that certainly didn't appreciate our efforts, This is a true situation. It was a postcard and was addressed as follows:

Post Office Department delivery to this crooked unscrupulous dirty filthy man who calls himself Inspector Jack Taub, 350 Golden Shore Long Beach, California. A person who unlawfully allowed seizure of badly disabled man's pet monkey. His only means of support for past 18 years. Using dehumanization crooked systematically squeezing methods this State Fish and Game bureaucracy will gain you only exposure as to how you earn your blood money. An injustice that will be settled in court soon.

Just goes to show we can't win no matter how hard we try.

APPENDIX A

Region 5, Long Beach

ANNUAL RESTRICTED SPECIES REPORT

The following animals were in the possession of Region 5 during the year ending June 30, 1977.

RAPTORS

Redtailed hawks	229	Kingfisher	1
Sparrow hawks	124	Mocking bird	1
Great horned owls	89	Crested bluejay	1
Red shouldered hawks	11	Scrub jay	1
Prairie falcons	20	Duck	2
Golden eagles	15	Quail	1
Barn owls	151	Dove	12
Burrowing owls	30	Magpie	1
Harris hawks	6	Gulls	12
Ravens	10	Turtle dove	1
Steppe eagles	2	Ruddy duck	1
Coopers hawk	13	Grebes	3
Crow	7	Lesser scaup	3
Blue birds	3	Brown pelican	1
Common loon	2	Furruginous hawk	1
Herring gull	1	Canada geese	6
Mallard	7	Golden pheasant	1
Kestrels	26	Ring-bill gull	1
Screech owl	8	Teico (Asian) eagle	1
Sharp shin hawk	3	Chukar	1
Whitetail kite	4	Bald eagle	1
English sparrows	6	Call duck	1
Bandtail pigeon	4	Ring-neck pheasant	3
Barn pigeon	8	Longear owl	1
Lace-neck dove	2	Blue heron	3
Mourning dove	3		

REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS

Desert tortoises	454	Box turtle	1
Texas tortoises	6	Snapping turtle	1
Rhonoceros viper	1	Green sea turtle	1
Desert iguana	36	Alligator lizard	1
Horned toads	18	Rosy boa	1
Rattle snakes	7	California lyre snake	1
Common king snake	2	Patch nosed snake	1
Gopher snake	3	Mountain king snake	1

MAMMALS

Bobcats	6	Cottontail	2
Black bear	7	Europeal polecat	1
Gerbils	51	River otter	1
South American raccoon	3	Kinkajous	3
North American raccoon	71	Nutria	2
Ferrets	9	Mouflon	3
Grey fox	26	Monkey	30
Red fox	6	South American Porcupine	1
Coyote	20	Mountain lion	2
Opossum	22	Bighorn sheep	2
Sea lion	1	Spider monkey	3
Badger	1	Mule deer	3
Deer	11	Timber wolf	1
African lion	2	Kit fox	1
Skunks	15	Wolf	1
Ground squirrel	4		

FISH

Walking catfish	6
Gar fish	2
Stingrays	28
Clawed frogs	10
Crayfish	2000
Western newt	30
Piranha	506
Snakeheads	300