

# Backyard Wildlife

By Juju Wellemeyer & Jim Mason

When you think of wildlife do your thoughts go to the countryside, a local park, or a nature center? What about the wildlife that lives with you every day?

Our backyards are home to many different species whether we want them living there or not. Wildlife has been forced to either retreat as the cities expand or adapt to living among us. Urban wildlife have adapted fairly well to our concrete streets and buildings. They find little patches of habitat tucked in corners of yards that provide shelter. They find garbage cans that provide meals and drinking water in gutters and littered containers. And sometimes they find backyard havens with wildlife houses, native grasses and wildflowers full of nutritious seeds, and ponds and birdbaths with fresh water!

Not everyone is excited at the thought of hosting a variety of species in their yard, but wildlife can be helpful and observing them can be rewarding. Many insects are beneficial to the health of your yard and garden. Birds are colorful bursts of feathers and song, and small rodents, mammals, and reptiles all play important roles in the ecosystem.

There are several ways to attract urban wildlife to your yard or neighborhood. Tailoring your landscape to the surrounding environment will create a cohesive sanctuary for a variety of native species. Planting native plants has benefits for you and urban wildlife. Prairie plants are adapted to use less water and can reduce soil erosion. Properly-located trees reduce energy costs by blocking summer sun and winter winds.

They also attract and support native wildlife, which will create a balanced ecosystem in your yard. Having a diversity of insects is good for your plants as some eat less desirable insects and others will pollinate your flowers.

Pollinators need native plants for food for them as well as their young. Insects in turn provide food for birds. Birds are attractive backyard visitors that provide insect control as well as entertainment with their behavior and songs. Equally as important as the vegetation in your yard is the availability of water. If fresh water sources are lacking, the sound of running or dripping water will draw wildlife to your yard. Remember that fresh, clean water is as necessary in the winter as it is in the summer.

To find these bountiful backyards, urban wildlife utilizes habitat corridors or vegetated patches of habitat that allow animals to move from one area to another in search of food, water, and cover. Culverts, ditches, hedgerows, road medians, and wildlife underpasses may all be used by wildlife to find your yard. Alternatively, if you experience trouble with urban wildlife, removing water sources, brush piles, food sources and access to your yard will discourage wildlife from visiting or taking up residence.

Animals are important in our ecosystem. Create a wildlife sanctuary in your yard and enjoy the wildness! You'll be glad you did!

## Fun Facts

1. Northern Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*): The masked bandit has adapted so well to humans that this opportunistic **omnivore** is at home in practically every city and town.
2. American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*): The early bird that gets the worm, robins prefer to eat worms and insects and are commonly seen foraging in yards early in the morning.
3. Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*): Adept at finding locations in the city to den, escape **predation** by coyotes and scavenge for food, these canines can be a common sight at dusk and dawn.
4. House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*): These wrens commonly live in manmade bird houses. They place spider egg sacs in their nests. The spiderlings eat nest pests like mites after they hatch.
5. American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*): This seed-eating bird is observed in Kansas year-round. In the summer it is bright yellow and in the winter it is brownish with buff wing-bars. They are easily attracted to bird feeders, so keep your feeder full!
6. Eastern Cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*): Rabbits have two kinds of **scat**; one you see that's brown and hard, and one that is soft, green and full of undigested nutrients they eat again. Talk about recycling and going green!
7. Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*): Bluebirds experience fierce competition from introduced species such as House Sparrows and European Starlings. They usually nest in park-like areas. Put up a bluebird house in an open field near you and you may become a bluebird landlord.
8. Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*): One of the most recognizable birds, the cardinal is the state bird in seven states (Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, Ohio, Virginia, West Virginia).
9. Hummingbird Clearwing Moth (*Hemaris thysbe*): These day-flying moths are sometimes seen in the garden. They have long, black antennae and never perch on the flowers they visit, which helps distinguish them from the bumblebees they mimic with their yellow and black coloration.
10. Honeybee (*Apis mellifera*): Honeybees are the most widely distributed and economically beneficial insect species in the world. Their pollination is responsible for much of the fruit production in the United States and elsewhere. Keep them happy in your garden by avoiding the use of insecticides!
11. Painted Lady (*Vanessa cardui*): This common butterfly is found in both the Old World and the New. The colorful eye-spots on its wings distract visually-oriented predators like birds so the insect can avoid being eaten.
12. Wheel Bug (*Arius cristatus*): This bug is named for the cog-like projections on its **pronotum** that reminds us of a gear wheel. Its bite is very painful, so never try to grab one.
13. Woodhouse's Toad (*Anaxyrus woodhousii*): Toads consume many insects, snails and worms. You can build shelters for them by making underground toad homes with a hole and some plywood.
14. Virginia Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*): The United States' only marsupial carries her young around in a pouch until they are too large. The young then leave the pouch and ride on their mother's back. They have **opposable** thumbs on their hind feet and **prehensile** tails.
15. Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*): These snakes have tiny teeth used to catch and hold prey including frogs, earthworms, toads and mice. They also eat other small snakes.
16. Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*): A picky fruit eater, orioles select only the ripest fruits to eat. They love oranges cut in half and even eat grape jelly.
17. Eastern Fox Squirrel (*Sciurus niger*): Fox Squirrels like acorns, walnuts and, in winter, tree buds. Their fondness for seeds often attracts them to bird feeders. They bury nuts when abundant and relocate them later using their sense of smell.
18. Brown Thrasher (*Toxostoma rufum*): These medium-sized birds sing a long, complicated song of doubled notes and phrases. They usually sing from high in the top of a tree.
19. Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*): This common species is easily recognized by the red stripe across both upper wings. Some overwinter as adults and others migrate here in spring from places further south. Flat rocks positioned around sun-lit nectar plants offer these and other butterflies a place to bask in the sun.
20. Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*): Skunks are known for their defense system of spraying foul smelling fluid. They have the ability to spray when they are just 8 days old but can't aim until after their eyes open when they are 24 days old.
21. Question Mark (*Polygonia interrogationis*): This butterfly is named for the small, white "question mark" on the underside of its hind wing. It is one of only a few butterflies that overwinters in Kansas as an adult.
22. Robber Fly (*Promachus vertebatus*): Robber flies are aerial predators that feed on other insects. They typically sit and watch for prey from a perch on tall vegetation. When they see a likely insect, they fly off and nab it in mid-air with their long, spiny legs, then give it a paralyzing bite and eat it.
23. Monarch (*Danaus plexippus*): This butterfly avoids predation by storing toxins in its body which makes it taste awful. Their numbers are declining due to a reduction in milkweeds, the plants required as food for the larvae. You can help them by planting milkweeds in your garden.
24. Bush Cicada (*Tibicen dorsata*): Mistakenly called locusts, some cicadas live long lives, up to 17 years! Most of their life is spent underground in the **nymph** stage, feeding on sap in tree roots. Each cicada species has a distinctive buzzy call, which the males use to attract a mate.
25. May Beetle (*Phyllophaga sp.*): Popularly known as June Bugs, these chunky insects are often attracted to porch lights in early summer. They are eaten by many different birds and mammals, forming a valuable link in the food chain.
26. Convergent Lady Beetle (Family Coccinellidae): These are beetles, not bugs! Both larvae and adults of this beneficial species feed on aphids and scale insects that can damage your plants.
27. Lightning Bug (Family Lampyridae): These beetles have species-specific light patterns so they can attract mates in the dark. With practice, you may be able to imitate the patterns with a flashlight in your yard to bring them to you.



### Glossary:

**Nymph:** Immature stage of insects with incomplete metamorphosis

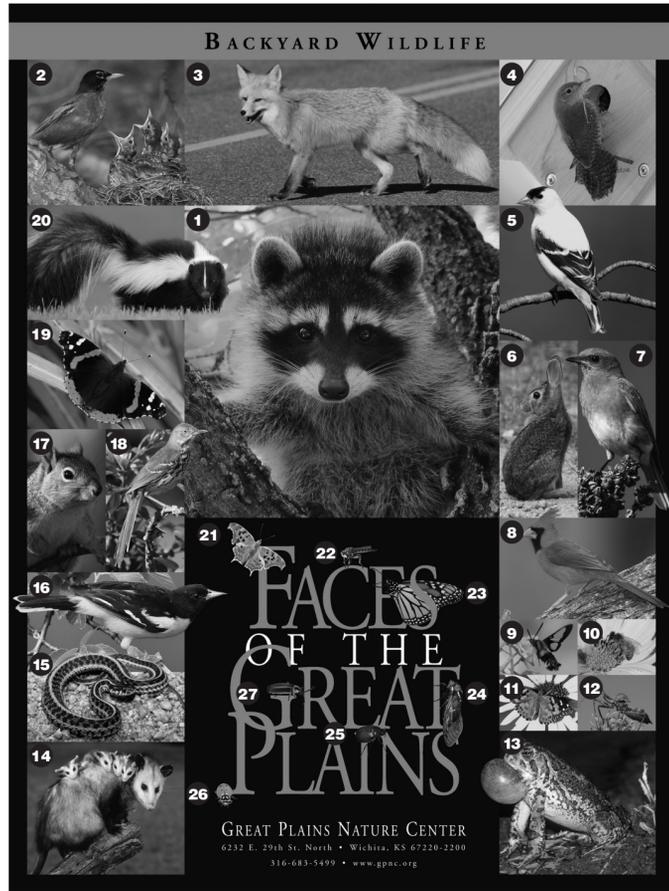
**Omnivore:** Consumer of both animal and plant material.

**Opposable:** Capable of being placed against the other fingers or toes on the same hand or foot.

**Predation:** Act of killing or eating other animals.

**Prehensile:** Able to grab or hold something by wrapping around it.

**Pronotum:** Plate-like structure that covers the top of the thorax on insects.



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## GREAT PLAINS NATURE CENTER

The Great Plains Nature Center is a cooperative project between the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Kansas Department of Wildlife & Parks and the City of Wichita Park and Recreation Department. The goal of the nature center is to provide opportunities for the public to investigate, understand and develop an appreciation for wildlife, the environment and foster a sound stewardship of natural resources. For more information, or to join our efforts, please contact us at:

Great Plains Nature Center  
6232 East 29th Street North Wichita, KS 67220  
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### Poster Sponsorship

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## Do Them a Favor. Leave them Alone!

It's common to encounter young, wild animals, especially in the spring and summer. Some people have an irresistible attraction to these wild youngsters, and want to take them home. Every year, the lives of young animals are needlessly jeopardized by well-intentioned people who take them from the wild in the mistaken belief the animals are abandoned or orphaned and will die if not given care. In fact, rescuing wildlife from the wild often results in the death of the animal.

### FIVE GOOD REASONS TO LEAVE THEM IN THE WILD

#### 1. They're Not Abandoned.

Bird and animal parents often leave their young while they search for food during the day. This is the time when the young are most vulnerable to well-meaning humans. Young fawns, for example, are quite safe when left alone because their color pattern and lack of scent help them to remain undetected until the doe returns. The adult animal is probably waiting for you to leave so it can return to care for its young.

#### 2. It's Illegal.

Picking up young animals is against the law. Both the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism and the Kansas Department of Health and Environment have regulations against such activity. Fines can be up to \$1,000. State permits are required to legally possess most species of wild animals. For some species, federal permits are required and fines are more severe.

#### 3. They May Carry Disease.

Even though they may look cute and fuzzy, wild animals carry a number of potential health threats. Rabies can be transmitted from a bite or saliva contacting an open wound. Distemper and rabies are the most common

illnesses that may be acquired from wild animals. Ticks and fleas borne by some animals carry Lyme and other diseases. Wild animals may also carry bacteria, roundworms, tapeworms, mites, and/or protozoans that cause diseases in humans or pets.

#### 4. They're Not Pets.

Although young animals may look cute and cuddly, they are still wild animals. Many well-meaning people have taken young animals home, then quickly learned they're not equipped to handle the animal as it matures. "Adopting" young wild animals may be an irresistible urge for some people, but wild animals typically make poor pets. Many people have been injured by animals that initially seemed easily-tamed.

#### 5. Good Intentions Can Be Deadly.

Many animals taken into captivity soon die. Those that don't are denied the opportunity to learn how to survive in their natural environment, so they seldom develop the skills necessary for them to survive when they are eventually returned to the wild. Their ability to find natural foods is hindered, and the natural wariness of humans that is learned in the wild is impaired. Young wildlife raised in captivity often develop an attachment to humans. Upon their release to the wild, they may have little fear of people and return to make nuisances of themselves, or put themselves in danger of traffic or attack from domestic animals. Further, when released to the wild they may be thrust as unwelcome intruders into the home range of another member of their species. And you might relocate an animal with disease into a population that did not have the disease.

**If you care, leave them there!**

### Owl's Nest gift shop

The Owl's Nest gift shop at the Great Plains Nature Center carries a wide variety of Kansas-themed merchandise including books, games, puppets, music and DVDs. Consider making your next purchase from the Owl's Nest to help support our educational mission. Owl's Nest hours are Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. The nature center is open Monday through Saturday from 9 a.m. – 5 p.m., excluding holidays.

### Credits

Photo credits:

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