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# Living With Wildlife and Avoiding Conflict



By **Gemma Alexander**

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Most people love animals, and environmentalists in particular care about wildlife. Many of us even design our home landscapes to work as [backyard wildlife habitats](#). But not all wild animals are equally welcome in our backyards, and some of them can even be dangerous. As urban areas expand (or in the case of Japan, [contract](#)), homeowners are increasingly coming into conflict with wild animals. Can't we all just get along? Sometimes it just takes a lit bit of know-how for the answer to be "yes."

## Wildlife Habitat

Habitat comprises [four basic components](#): food, water, cover, and space. There are some species that require very specific conditions to survive. But as long as the four components of habitat are available, many species can adapt to surprisingly urban environments. Some wild species even thrive on the abundant

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food sources humans create. We tend to think of pris<sup>CLOSE</sup>, wilderness when we think of wildlife habitat. But most human habitats are shared with wild animals, from rural ranches that overlap with wolf territory to urban apartment buildings with nests of [mice](#) in the walls. Often the species that do best in proximity to humans are invasive species that can [push out more particular natives](#).



As our communities expand into their habitat, deer adjust by finding food in residential gardens.

## Conflicts With Wild Animals

Wildlife conflicts are becoming more common as human activity expands into previously undisturbed areas, from vast suburban housing developments to [agricultural expansion](#). While we work to ensure food, water, shelter, and space for birds and beneficial insects, the arrival ([by birth](#) or otherwise) of other wild species can be problematic. Gardens can support unsustainable deer and rabbit populations; garbage cans attract raccoons and [bears](#). Livestock can be eaten by wolves or mountain lions. Tragically, cats and small dogs are hunted by [coyotes](#) and [birds of prey](#). In Argentina, upscale communities have even been invaded by disorderly herds of [capybaras](#), who destroy lawns, fight dogs, and knock down bicyclists.

When predators like [mountain lions](#) or bears wander into the suburbs, it [can be dangerous](#) for people. But the animal is the one most often in danger. Such sightings frequently result in the animal being shot by frightened [residents](#) or [by officials](#) who have little experience transporting large mammals. Smaller, less threatening animals are often endangered by [pet cats](#) or by [traps](#) and poisons meant for other species. Sometimes, nuisance wildlife can be relocated to the wild or a zoo. But [trapped animals](#) don't always survive relocation or may return to the place where they created a nuisance. Zoos do not have unlimited capacity to house local wildlife.



We can't blame animals for following their instincts. It's our responsibility to study their behavior and adapt our own to avoid conflict.

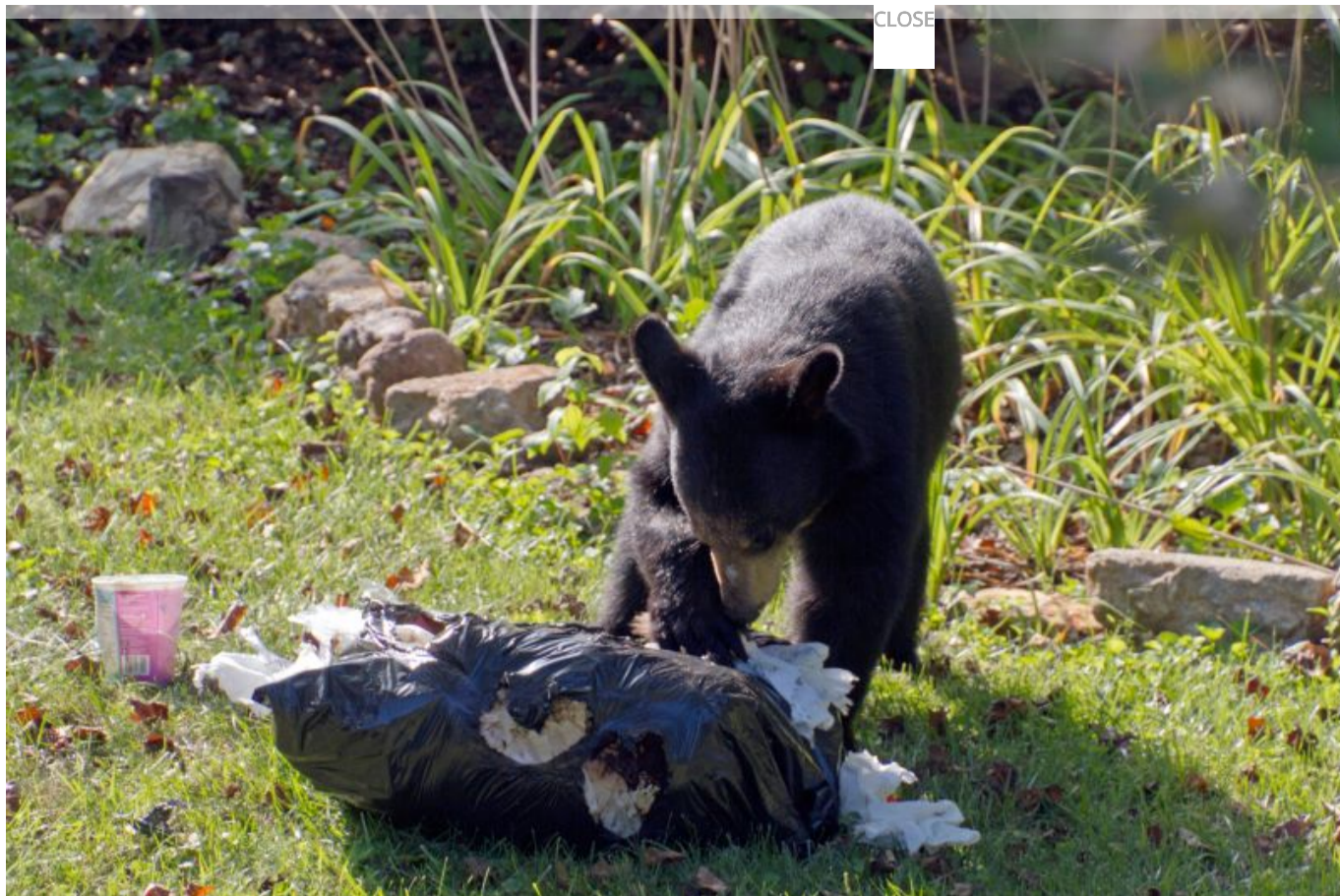
## Mediating Wildlife Conflict

Fencing and other barriers are critical components of managing human wildlife interactions. But there is simply not enough remaining wilderness to exclude wildlife from human settlements entirely. It [wouldn't even be desirable](#) to do so. Fortunately, it is possible for humans to coexist in overlapping habitats with wildlife – even larger, more dangerous animals. In the book [“Wilder,”](#) Millie Kerr describes a system of nightlights and text message alerts that minimize crop damage and human encounters with wild elephants in India. Some African villages maintain beehives to deter elephants. Even some Western U.S. ranchers are overcoming their infamous antagonism against wolves with [new herding strategies](#), including following [Native wisdom](#).

Long-time [residents of bear country](#) have learned to use bear-proof garbage containers, feed pets indoors, harvest fruit promptly, and lock their garage doors. One of the first things people should do when they move to a new area is learn about their neighbors: What poisonous bugs are there? What predators? What species of wildlife do residents frequently spot in yards, greenbelts, and nighttime roads? Talk to your human neighbors, make [your own observations](#), and check with your local extension office or parks department.

Once you know what kind of wildlife shares your habitat, take the time to learn a little bit about their habits. Many of the people who can tell you which animals live near you can offer tips on avoiding unwanted encounters. Many states, like [Washington](#), maintain reference materials for living with the specific types of wildlife found in their borders. The [Living with Wildlife Foundation](#) also provides resource guides. [“Living with Wildlife”](#) is a helpful book that describes more than 100 North American wildlife species and what to do when you encounter them; [“Wild Neighbors”](#) focuses on 35 of the most common species and the problems associated with them.

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Long-time residents of bear country have learned to use bear-proof garbage containers.

## Protecting Wild Animals and Ourselves

Whatever species share your neighborhood, the most important thing to remember is that we cannot blame animals for following their instincts. As the supposedly more advanced, intelligent species, it is our responsibility to study their behavior and adapt our own. Doing so not only keeps people and animals safer, it expands the usable habitat for dwindling species, and it helps us maintain our own connection to the natural world.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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