Perspective

What *you* say matters

June 2022 | £7.99 | perspectivemag.co.uk

70 Years of Elizabeth II
50 Years of Pride

Celebrate!

Philip Hensher . Rosie Wilby . Iman Qureshi . Terence Blacker
Lily Webb . Patrick Gale . Susie Boyt . Chris Smith . Dominic Hilton
Rebecca Rukeyser . Zoe Strimpel . Anouchka Grose

+ Gavin Esler interviews Ed Davey

Wade Graham's Walden

Building a Noah's Ark in our backyards

Night time footage of a raccoon taking a dip in a backyard. Photo: @losangeleswildfriends on Instagram

The more I get used to living with the wildlife around my home in Los Angeles, the more wildlife seems to be living with me. There have always been rats, spiders, flies, ants and such – garden variety pests, plus the more appealing critters like squirrels and sparrows, that share our urban lives. But there are many more animals I've had to come to a *modus vivendi* with. I've learned to watch out for skunks on the path at night, to not leave out pet food or rubbish, which unfailingly attract opossums and raccoons, and to keep a sharp eye out for coyotes before letting my cats outside in the mornings.

Ten years ago this struck me as a surplus of wild beasts to cope with, but year on year their numbers and variety have only escalated. It's now rarely one skunk on the path, but a family, not one raccoon but a gang, scuffling and squawking on the roof in the wee hours. These mammalian characters join a Noah's Ark of others that make themselves at home hereabouts: hawks, owls, ravens, herons, gulls, myriad songbirds, lizards, bats, gophers, and snakes – to name just some vertebrates. In friends' neighbourhoods, closer to the city's edge, bears regularly browse gardens, dip in backyard swimming pools in summer, and help themselves to the contents of refrigerators. Recently, even bobcats have become common in some suburban districts. Posts of doorbell-camera footage of wild animals' doings now crowd social media.

To top it all off, in 2011, a male mountain lion moved into a city park just a few miles away, having improbably crossed multiple freeways from his distant mountain birthplace. Named P-22 by biologists who study the local cougar populations, he has thrived under the actual shadow of the Hollywood sign, fed by abundant deer fattened on the lawns and memorial flower bouquets of two landscaped cemeteries adjacent to the park, where he passes by the graves of Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Jackson. Because of this venison subsidy, P-22 hasn't had to resort to dining on people's pets (though he did once eat a koala at the LA Zoo), and so has become a beloved celebrity in his own right, frequently spotted strolling along neighbourhood streets.

LA's wild urban biodiversity may be well-publicised, but it isn't unique nor even unusual. Most North American cities now have resident coyotes; many struggle with rampant suburban deer populations that graze shrubbery and collide with vehicles. Some have even more exotic residents: alligators and venomous snakes in yards and parks in the Southeastern US, polar bears and eagles scavenging rubbish tips in the northern regions. In many other cities, people cohabit with not-so adorable "charismatic megafauna": Berlin has wild boars, Mumbai prowling leopards, Rajasthan garbage-eating sloth bears. Thieving langur monkeys bedevil urban dwellers all over South Asia. In Indonesia their role is played by macaques; in Cape Town, by baboons. Even penguins make themselves an urban nuisance nearby elsewhere in South Africa.

British cities are no less attractive ▶

to wildlife: Glasgow has its mink, otters, and roe deer; Newcastle its kittiwakes nesting in the Tyne bridge; Bristol its gulls and badgers. Life of all kinds abounds in gardens, parks and waterways. Like everywhere else, London is home to a thriving population of red foxes, unremarkable neighbours in almost any postcode: in 2011, the same year that P-22 moved to Hollywood, "Romeo" took up residence 72 stories up in The Shard. I've seen foxes casually sauntering up Great Russell Street of a summer evening, and peregrine falcons gruesomely plucking pigeons around the Barbican and Tate Modern, as people sipped wine at sidewalk cafes below.

We tend to think of these animals as outliers and exceptions: wild creatures don't belong in cities. Cities are for us, and *elsewhere* – somewhere out there in nature – is for them. But this clean line has never existed. Human habitations have always been thoroughly infiltrated by other life forms, especially those like us, tolerating and even thriving in urban environs: rodents and the cats that eat them, pigeons, sparrows and starlings, not to mention lice, fleas, flies, cockroaches, and plants we call weeds. These are "synanthropes", creatures that live together with man by their volition – as opposed to working animals or crop plants, which live with us by our volition. When working animals were banished from our homes (relatively recently), we banished our acceptance of this fundamental coexistence and codependency. But, undeterred, precisely as our built environment has sprawled outward with no respect for natural limits, nature has come flooding back into "our" spaces. The change is quantifiable: nesting gulls in Bristol, for example, increased in recent decades from 100 breeding pairs to 1,200. Evolution in urban areas has been documented to proceed with breakneck speed. The peppered moths whose dark and pale variants track urban pollution in UK woodlands are only the most famous case. Urbanised Great Tits sing "faster, shorter, higher-pitched songs" than their country cousins, to be heard over low-frequency traffic noise. Mice in New York's Central Park have evolved to tolerate disease-causing fatty human foods and spoiling, discarded peanuts. Caribbean anole lizards have adapted to concrete urban surfaces by growing longer legs and feet with more clingy pads than their forest, tree-climbing relatives.

But these few cases don't mean nature is healthy in cities – just that some species have adapted enough to avoid becoming extinct under unnatural stresses. Most haven't. In truth, our ever-expanding footprint is disastrous, pushing much of the wild world to the brink. After habitat destruction and fragmentation, pollution and climate change, roads and their traffic are among the worst threats.

We're getting better at mitigating some of this. Wildlife crossings, or green bridges – overpasses, tunnels, viaducts, culverts or other structures designed to allow animals to cross barriers – are multiplying. The Netherlands has more than 600; hundreds more have been built in Europe, the UK, Canada, US, Australia and elsewhere. Most are built for the big critters that capture people's hearts, like elk, bears, deer, or badgers – and not coincidentally capture their wallets. In the US alone, more than one million animals a day are estimated to be hit by vehicles, causing $8 billion a year in damage. But the real benefits of crossings are mitigating extirpation and genetic isolation caused by road barriers. Communities have built tunnels for frogs and toads. Christmas Island, Australia, has a bridge to allow 50 million red crabs to migrate across a road. Longview, Washington, prides itself on its eighteen-metre-long "nutty narrows bridge" to get squirrels safely over a busy street.

Cities and nature are inextricably mixed, but badly matched – by our design

Outside Los Angeles, work began in April on an $87m overpass intended to bring new blood to a population of mountain lions so hemmed in by deadly freeways that it's suffering from inbreeding and birth defects. Spanning 210 feet across ten lanes of traffic carrying 300,000 cars a day, it will be the largest in world. But it will be no more than an expensive sticking plaster.

We need to go farther than trying to blunt our built environment's worst impacts. We need to reconsider our place in, and relationship to, wild nature. The assumption that there is a line separating us from it is false. Cities and nature are inextricably mixed, but badly matched – by our design. We need to rethink, reimagine, and redesign our communities to integrate wild nature, by making them porous and multi-layered, incorporating an animal infrastructure into our traditional networks of roads, pipes, and powerlines. We need to recognise animal pathways and accommodate them instead of blocking them. We need to provide passage, but also refuge: more green space, including in interstices and gaps, intentionally managed to be un-managed, to give nature the spaces it needs to move, connect, shelter and grow.

Equally important, we need to suspend hostilities against nature: cease to pollute and contaminate, and cease to shoot and poison, but instead understand that all layers of ecosystems are required for them to function well, including predators, and to design and manage our communities to find that balance. P-22 showed us the connections: when he arrived in the city park he was strapping and healthy, but in a few years trail cameras caught him looking like a perp in the police drunk tank, all tattered fur and swollen face. In fact, he had a bad case of mange, caused by eating animals which had in turn eaten rats and mice poisoned by anticoagulant rodenticides which kill slowly by blocking the blood from clotting. Biologists sedated him and treated him, and he recovered his handsome glow. Such poisons bioaccumulate up the food chain, harming hawks, owls, cats, and smaller mammals, including those that help to control noxious insects – like badgers, foxes, skunks and bats. Not every neighbourhood wants to live with a mountain lion, but let's stop poisoning the smaller predators and instead welcome them into the fabric of our communities. Not least because they won't be kept out.

@losangeleswildfriends is a backyard camera on Wade's street, full of the nightly doings of skunks, raccoons, possums, rats, etc

Wade Graham is the author of "American Eden, a cultural history of gardens in America", "Dream Cities: Seven Urban Ideas That Shape the World" and "Braided Waters: Environment and Society in Molokai, Hawaii". He is a trustee of Glen Canyon Institute in Salt Lake City and lives in Los Angeles. wadegraham.com