

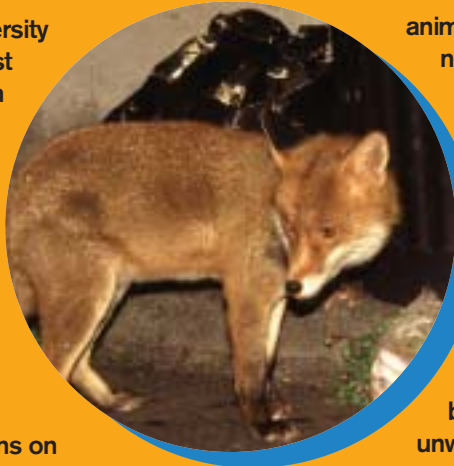
Where the wild things are

Stroll through the streets of Bangkok and you might fall in step with an elephant. Peer into a storm drain in Melbourne and you could find a metre-long eastern water dragon staring back. Scan the Chicago skyline and you may spot peregrine falcons perched atop church steeples.

Astonishing biodiversity can be found almost everywhere, even in the heart of densely populated cities. Mention urban wildlife and people generally think of mice, thrushes nesting in parks, cockroaches scuttling behind cabinets and pigeons on statues. Yet cities often contain greater biodiversity than the countryside around them.

Many species – as if to ignore zoning regulations – move from the countryside into town. As intensive agriculture and other developments shrink their natural habitats, resourceful animals seek shelter where they can. While at first glance modern cities with their crowds, congestion and concrete pavements might seem hostile places for animals to live, they are in fact peppered with little known wildlife havens – backyards, creeks, rivers, rooftop gardens and vacant lots – hosting miniature ecosystems, as well as officially designated parks, nature trails and lakes.

Just as with humans, there are some



animals we like as neighbours, and others we wish would move away. Many city dwellers encourage wildlife to live alongside them by providing birdfeeders and brush piles. Others unwittingly invite unwanted guests by leaving out trash and pet food. Urban encounters with coyotes, panthers, mountain lions and other large carnivores are growing more common every year – but the biggest killers are deer, which cause vehicle collisions when they run into the streets.

Highly adaptable urban specialists, such as rats and squirrels, increase dramatically with abundant food and cover – often at the expense of less mobile, less amorous species like amphibians and reptiles. According to Stanford University biologist Stephen Palumbi, they 'travel around on our coat-tails' and as repeated success trains their behaviour, some come to depend so much on humans that they are no longer truly wild.

Sites for sore eyes

Like oases in asphalt deserts, city parks and gardens shine as green beacons for wildlife. Yet increasingly urban biodiversity hotspots are coming in shades of brown and grey.



Brownfield sites – underused or abandoned and reclaimed by nature – are seen as ripe for redevelopment: indeed some environmentalists urge developers to concentrate on them and leave the countryside unspoiled. Cluttered though they may be by industrial remnants and haphazard foliage, they are often important reserves for wildlife.

Fortuitously free from human intervention, unattended brownfields

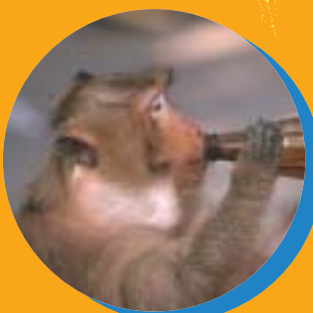


photo: Cyril Ruoso/Still Pictures

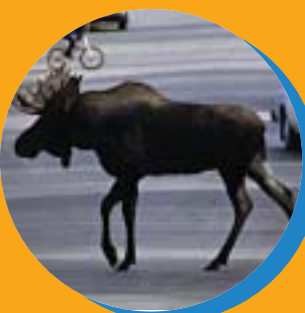


photo: Anchorage Daily News/Still Pictures



photo: Ralph Ginzburg/Still Pictures



photo: Fritz Polking/Still Pictures

often provide niche habitats for flora and fauna declining elsewhere. Many contain complex ecosystems replete with wildflowers, ferns, goldfinches, skylarks, butterflies, bats, bumblebees and beetles. Some boast a startling array of biodiversity that rivals even famous botanical gardens, public parks and waterways. One in every four wildlife sites in London (home to Kew Gardens, Hyde Park and the River Thames) are partly or wholly brownfield.



Not all brownfields are equally valuable. Some are indeed ideal for redevelopment in cities pressed for building space. But in other cases, rehabilitating these undisturbed, derelict areas – even into green spaces meant to restore biodiversity – may be missing the forest for the trees.



photo: Topfoto

Gardens in the sky



photo: <http://www.sentex.net/edc/VerticalGardens/>

The roofs over our heads could soon become the grounds beneath our feet. As urban development claims greenery and brownfields below, conservationists are increasingly looking up.

Green roofs – from one-storey buildings to skyscrapers – can bring greenery and wildlife into the heart of downtown cities. They also save energy by providing insulation, absorb air and noise pollution, protect buildings from harsh weather, absorb rain and decrease storm water runoff, and combat rising temperatures in urban areas

Popular throughout Europe – there are roughly 1,300 hectares of rooftop greenery in Germany alone – and catching on in North America and Asia, green roofs range in size and function. They are as diverse as the birds, animals, insects and humans they attract.

Ten years ago, three young Canadians – Jonathan Woods, Tracey Loverock and Lauren Baker – founded Annex Organics and decided to farm the roof of a Toronto warehouse. Their first crop yielded 230 kilograms of organic tomatoes, which they sold to local restaurants and shops. They have since expanded into alfalfa, lentils, peppers, aubergines and cape gooseberries. Hoping to increase local food production, the city partially funded the venture and has invested in research into similar projects.

Pedestrians in downtown Tokyo can glimpse cherry blossoms atop the crane maker Komatsu's 10-storey office building. For almost 40 years the company's 1,300 square metre garden has provided a pleasant respite to workers who spend their breaks among 1,000 different varieties of flowers and plants. In 2001, the city mandated that all roofs over 1,000 square metres on new buildings be partially covered in vegetation. To date 16.3 hectares of green area have been created, a similar size to the city's Hibiya Park.

photo: <http://www.habitat67.com/green-roofs/photos.html>

