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Toronto's flourishing fauna



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Tristin Hopper Oct 1, 2011 - 8:30 AM ET | Last Updated: Sep 30, 2011 7:06 PM ET

Driven out by bulldozers in the 905, and lured into the city by lush, chemical-free parks — Toronto's urban fauna are being forced to live closer to humans than ever before.

And that has some people wondering if the city is in the midst of a wildlife resurgence.

"Everything is increasing in numbers ... more hawks, more mice, more rabbits, more everything," said Carlo Panacci, owner of Toronto's Cain Pest Control. "I remember seeing my first wild rabbit 12 years ago — I couldn't believe it," said Mr. Panacci. "I see them everywhere now."

The lunchrooms of other pest control agencies echo with similar "firsts." "When we started in '84, we never saw an opossum," says Brad Gates, owner of AAA Gates' Wildlife Control, a humane wildlife removal agency. "Now we're getting half-a-dozen calls a week." The same goes for foxes, he adds.

At an average rate of 25 acres a day, Toronto's hinterlands are being plowed over for new subdivisions and mini malls. With each den and nest paved over, thousands of animals are fleeing into riverside greenbelts or unmowed hydro corridors where they

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animals are heading into riverside greenbelts or unmowed hydro corridors where they unwittingly stumble into the garbage and squirrel-rich streets of the 416.

“It doesn’t take long for them to look around and say ‘I’m now in a subdivision, I could just eat garbage or sit next to this birdfeeder now,’” says Mr. Gates.

The traditional hiding places of urban fauna are also getting constricted. As thousands of new Torontonians swell into the city limits, parks and greenbelts are swelling with joggers and dogwalkers like never before.

“I’ve seen more deer in my Highland Creek backyard in the past 2-3 years than I’ve seen in the past 10 years,” says Scarborough councillor Glenn De Baeremaeker. “The deer that used to hide back in the bush are now being scared out.”

One deer made it all the way to the streets near Union Station on a November weekday morning in 2009 before being tranquilized and shipped off to a more appropriate environment.

But not everyone agrees that the city is being inundated with new wildlife.

“We get up to 30,000 calls annually about wildlife issues, and I would not say that there are more foxes, coyotes or opossums in Toronto this year than other years,” writes Nathalie Karvonen, executive director of the Toronto Wildlife Centre, in an email to the Post. Wildlife reports always go up at times of the year when animal mothers start kicking their offspring out of the home, Once the juveniles find their own territories — or get snagged by predators — sightings usually decrease, she writes.

Mr. De Baeremaeker notes that wildlife reports may be driven simply by an irrational fear of roaming critters. Coyotes have been in Scarborough since the Golden Mile was the site of munitions production.

Now, says Mr. De Baeremaeker, the sight of a single wild dog can prompt panicked calls into his ward office. “People see a fox in a park and they panic, they think ‘the dingo’s going to get my baby,’” said Mr. De Baeremaeker.

Toronto’s foxes may have been vaccinated against rabies in the mid-1980s, but Mr. Gates says he gets calls from homeowners worried that a backyard fox may lunge at them in a rabies-fuelled rage.

Of course, Toronto wildlife has taken a few public relations hits in recent years. In 2009, a Chihuahua was snatched “in broad daylight” by a coyote in the Beaches. In January of last year, a chocolate lab named Choco was reportedly set on by two coyotes in Bluffer’s Park. Still, compared to the hundreds — if not thousands — of Toronto dogs and cats run over by cars each year, the kill record of coyotes and foxes is still relatively benign, says Mr. De Baeremaeker.

Compared to other metropolises, Toronto’s urban fauna is generally of the benign, storybook variety. In parts of India, residents have to contend with feral cows. In Delhi, a deputy mayor died after falling from his balcony while fighting off a pack of wild monkeys. In Australia in 2009, villages reported being overrun with wild camels tearing apart roads and houses in search of water.

While Torontonians bolt raccoon-proof plastic latches on to their compost bins, many towns north of North Bay are forced to encase their garbage cans in bear-proof enclosures. While Scarborough dogwalkers are warned by Toronto police to keep watch for 30-pound coyotes, schoolchildren on the B.C. coast are instructed on how to fend off an attack by a roving cougar.

For Mr. De Baeremaeker, Toronto’s purportedly surging ranks of fauna are not a scourge, but a “joyous thing.”

“To see a fox sunning itself in the park, it’s really beautiful ... and it’s not going to steal your baby.”

National Post

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