

WILD CITY

IN THE

Mention wildlife in big cities like London, Sydney and Chicago, and cocktail lounges and nightclubs come to mind. But beyond the city lights, in shadows and forgotten rooftop corners, a different type of wildlife is thriving.

By MIKE FRANCO

The honking was getting out of control in Chicago. The noise wasn't coming from cars on their way to work. It was a cacophony from hundreds of geese who had taken over the city's parks, thanks to the plentiful bodies of water and safe nesting sites in city green spaces.

The Canada goose (*Branta canadensis*) glut was problematic because the adult birds are large, aggressive towards humans and leave unsanitary droppings all over the parks. Action groups and civic authorities tried a few approaches to keep numbers down, which worked, up to a point. But nature has a way of evening things out - coyotes (*Canis latrans*) moved in.

In the 1990s, according to Stan Gehrt, professor of wildlife ecology at Ohio State University in the United States, the urban population of coyotes in Chicago began to spike when coyote pelt prices in the US dropped significantly, leading to a reduction in hunting and trapping. Surplus coyotes headed for the city, where the pickings - especially goose dinners - were easy. As a result, annual goose population growth in Chicago dropped from

The ubiquitous pigeon has come a long way from the cliffs of Asia to peering over New York City from the top of the **Empire State Building**. Coyotes have an urban presence in many US cities: **one even caught the train** in Portland, Oregon (right).



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES (MAIN PIC), AP

10-14 percent to less than 1 percent.

The reduction in the problematic goose population is just one of many surprises Gehrt discovered while researching city critters. He says he and his team severely underestimated the coyotes' ability to exploit an urban landscape and adjust to human activities.

"For example, we didn't realise that they were able to set up territories, raise young and develop packs in downtown areas ... they're able to squeeze out what little bits of grass and bushes we've left and make a living out of them," he says.

Which demonstrates that animals, just like people, need only a little cunning and a good deal of tenacity to survive in the big city. And that is exactly what they're doing in built-up areas from Bangkok to Boston - and maybe even in your back yard.

Of Pests and Pets

It's been around 12,000 years since humankind began to dwell in permanent settlements - and we've always brought the beasts and birds along with us. Wolves began hanging around human communities to eat scraps and save on energy required for hunting. As a result, inhabitants got an early-warning alarm system for their village, a pest control force that helped keep the rat population in check and, eventually, a hunting partner and companion in the form of the domestic dog.

Pigeons, or rock doves, left the cliffs of Asia to live in artificial cliffs like cathedral spires and other tall buildings man constructed throughout Europe. Smart city dwellers soon discovered that the birds could be trained to live in dovecots, and counted on them to fatten up on food scraps during the day then return at night. As a result, the birds soon became a source of a tasty - and practically free - pigeon pie for dovecot owners everywhere.

With such a strong correlation between food and the fecundity of



animals in urban areas, it is easy to understand why the possum population in Melbourne, Australia, is as rich as it is. Here, not only do the cuddly, furry little omnivores native to Australian bushland have plentiful pickings in back gardens, but they often get fed by residents too.

Possums (of the *Phalangeriformes* family) tend to keep to themselves, but often nest in roof spaces, and produce a very strong smell in the process. This leads some city folks to think of them as pests.

But Sandy Fernee, executive officer of Wildlife Victoria, believes the number of such possum-disparagers will eventually diminish. "Give it another generation or two and people are going to turn around and

As the Kenyan capital of Nairobi grows outwards and upwards, urban dwellers are becoming accustomed to seeing wild animals such as the **Grant's gazelle** (left) and **topi** near the heart of the city.



PHOTOS: CORBIS (MAIN PIC), ALAMY

go 'well, this is part of our environment,'" she says. "And that isn't just the air we breathe, it's not just the plants we plant, it's also the fauna that's flying around and jumping from fence to fence."

Location, Location, Location

In addition to abundant food supplies, urban environments have several advantages over life in the wilderness. For one, cities are warmer, giving weaker animals a greater chance of surviving harsh winters. With networks of tunnels, conduits, drains and abandoned buildings, a city can also provide a rich variety of hiding and nesting locales.

Which explains the draw Singapore has for the reticulated python

(*Python reticulatus*). While Singapore's planners have turned most of what was once a jungle filled with wild animals into a gleaming city of steel and glass surrounded by an urban sprawl of concrete and bitumen, there are still sufficient spaces for tropical forest critters to eke out an existence.

The reticulated python has learned to consider Singapore's extensive sewer system - built to handle the heavy rainfall the island receives - a personal highway. Wrong turns can get interesting though, as the family of Singaporean taxi driver Tan Kok-chye can attest after finding a 2-metre long python in their toilet bowl several years ago. According to zoo curator Francis

Holy Cow

In many cities around the world, the population of certain species can approach numbers so high they are considered pests. Usually these critters are small, like roaches and rodents, and stay out of sight causing relatively minor damage.

In New Delhi, however, an overabundance of cows regularly creates traffic jams, produces unsanitary sidewalks and has caused fatal car accidents. But because cows are considered sacred to the majority of Indians, very little has been done to rope in the problem - until now.

The city has employed 164 "cow catchers" who lasso and literally wrestle the blessed bovines into submission. The cows are registered, microchipped and then taken to sanctuaries run by Hindu charities on the outskirts of the city. The work is dangerous not only because of sharp hooves and horns but because of the sharp tempers of New Delhi citizens who have pelted the urban cowboys with stones in order to protect their beloved cud-chewers.





Lim, known locally as “The Snake Man,” the Singapore Zoo receives over 100 reticulated pythons per year from the police who respond to citizen snake complaints.

“In the olden days when Singapore used to have a lot of farms, the snakes would eat the pigs, chickens and ducks,” Lim says. “Of course, most of the farms are gone now and the pythons normally stay in the forest. But they do come up through a number of drains, often ending up in Chinatown because they follow the drain network there. And they hunt small cats and rats.”

The zoo provides veterinary check-ups for the snakes, then microchips them and hands them over to government authorities for reintroduction into Singapore’s dwindling patches of uninhabited terrain.

And in much the same way the coyotes keep the geese population under control in Chicago, the pythons keep the numbers of rats down in the city-state.

Safer in Cities?

Accidental flushing (and traffic-dodging) aside, many animals sim-

ply consider an uptown address safer than country quarters because of a reduced number of predators.

One such animal that enjoys a predator-free city existence is the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*). But it wasn’t always exempt from danger. In the 1970s, poison from DDT nearly drove the raptor into extinction. The banning of the pesticide for agricultural use in 1972 came just in time to give the bird a talon-hold on survival in the United States. Other countries followed suit, and since its removal from the endangered species list in 1999, peregrine falcon numbers have been steadily increasing - especially in cities where massive skyscrapers replicate the rocky cliff ledges where they like to live.

According to Tim Webb of Britain’s Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, traditional countryside strongholds that used to be havens for the falcons are no longer as safe as cities. “In the uplands they are still persecuted; they are still hunted, poisoned and trapped. So we now have more peregrines in central London than in some of their traditional heartlands,” he says.



Residents and tourists in Nara, Japan, often come across wild deer (top). The ready availability of food scraps outside homes makes possums a regular sight in Australian cities. Sometimes the many pythons found in homes and other urban areas of Singapore end up becoming pets (bottom).

PHOTOS (FROM TOP): CORBIS, ALAMY, GETTY IMAGES

Rats!

It might not be a pleasant thought, but rats are so much our unseen city companions that scientists have been able to track human migration patterns by mapping the genetic development of Asia’s black rat.

Much like the domestic dog, rats began hanging around human settlements to eat the easily available food found in villages. One of the world’s most common rats, the Norway or brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*) originated in northern Asia and travelled to Europe with settlers, arriving in the 18th century. There are reports of thousands of them crossing Russia’s Volga River in 1727. From Europe, they hitched a ride on ships to the New World, disembarking in North America around 1755.

Brown rats now live on all continents except Antarctica, and feel particularly at home in city sewers as they can swim up to 800 metres at a time and can survive by treading water for up to three days. Because they are omnivorous and one female can produce 60 young per year, it is difficult to contain rat populations, but it is often considered a necessity as they can spread a variety of troublesome diseases.

A Mumbai rat-catcher tackles the problem.



PHOTOS: CORBIS (RATS); WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY (BEAVER)



While Jose the beaver isn’t enjoying a swim or foraging for food in New York City’s Bronx River, he puts his powerful jaws to work on chopping down trees.

Buzz on the Street

Another high-flying city dweller can be found in the luxury shopping district of Tokyo known as Ginza, where the buzz on the street is often about the latest designer shoes. On the rooftops, though, the buzz is made by thousands of industrious honeybees (*Apis mellifera*) placed there in 2006 as part of the Ginza Hachimitsu (honey) Project. From an initial swarm of 30,000 bees, their numbers swelled to 150,000 in just a year and they manufactured 250 kilograms of honey. Their success is largely due to the fact that each bee has a range of about 4 kilometres, giving them access to a surprising number of Tokyo’s pollen-filled parks. Both the bees and the trees thrive from the relationship.

In addition to honey-maker, some of the bees now add security guard to their job descriptions. Because bees attack anything black that approaches their hives - like black bears stealing honey - they have been deployed in the hope that they will ward off crows that feed on the chicks and eggs of thousands of little terns (*Sterna albifrons*) that nest annually in Tokyo.

Busy as a Beaver

Bees aren’t the only hard-working animal residents to enjoy city life. A beaver named Jose made New

York City’s Bronx River (which runs through the Bronx Zoo) his home approximately two years ago. According to zoo representative Stephen Sautner: “For many years the river was just like an open sewer. Then about 20 years ago, we started these really strong clean-up efforts. Congressman Jose Serrano secured all of this federal money, and they pulled cars out of the river and educated the public. It paid off because Jose (named after the congressman) showed up.”

It’s a curious twist, as beavers (*Castor Canadensis*) were once plentiful in New York City, with the trade in their furs central to the founding of New Amsterdam (as the settlement was named after the Dutch bought the island of Manhattan in 1626 from native Americans). Alas, overzealous European trappers killed or drove them away. But now one of them has returned and staked its claim in the heart of the city.

“It makes me really happy that Jose is enjoying the city as much as the rest of us,” says New Yorker Chris Flanagan. “Maybe it’s Mother Nature’s way of saying she’s not all that mad at us anymore,” he grins.

Write to us at letters@discoverychannelmagazine.com and tell us about your encounters with wild animals in your towns or cities - or even better, send us photos.

