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THE wild ISSUE



ation experts

The call of concrete the jungle

The bright lights of the city have always been a people magnet but, as Annemarie Hoeve discovers, the animal kingdom also thrives in urban environments

Gone are the days when the urban jungle was solely the domain of people. Increasingly, wildlife is also flocking to our concrete citadels and discovering the joys of the modern metropolis. Cities around the world are home to more wildlife than you might think. In the United States, wild pigs have been spotted in Tuscon, bears are Seattle regulars and urban coyotes have taken a liking to Californian swimming pools. There are koalas in southern Sydney, Tokyo is teeming with jungle crows, and, mistaking skyscrapers for craggy mountains, peregrine falcons circle the skies above London and Amsterdam.

Perhaps no example is more famous than the pair of red-tailed hawks, known as Pale Male and Lola, who made headlines in 2004 when they claimed their own chunk of the Big Apple by building their nest in a cornice outside a swanky 5th Avenue penthouse. When the building's owners got rid of the nest, New Yorkers got in a flap, initiating a vigil to demand

its return. The nest was reinstated and the hawks still live there. Pale Male has gone on to attain celebrity status, with his own website and feature-length documentary: *The Legend of Pale Male*. It won Best of Festival at the 2009 International Wildlife Film Festival.

The popularity of these cosmopolitan lovebirds reveals a surprising passion for wildlife among people who have chosen an environment that could not be further removed from nature. Evidently, urbanites embrace sporadic encounters with animals; at least in controlled, unthreatening doses. In fact, we love our wildlife. "Surveys reveal that 60 million Americans enjoy watching wildlife and 46 million are birdwatchers," says John Hadidian, director of the US Humane Society's urban wildlife programme. "If someone sees a fox in their yard, they get very excited. There is something basic about our attraction to nature and wild animals. I fear we will lose this if we ▶▶

Illustrations: Moker Ontwerp (www.mokerontwerp.nl)



"Cities offer good shelter, lots of food, and have few threats for animals"



Wild Amsterdam

Q&A with the city's own urban ecologist Remco Daalder:

What types of wildlife live in Amsterdam?

"The city is up to 8°C hotter than its surroundings, so Amsterdam is a nice, warm snackbar for all sorts of animals. There are foxes, swifts, peregrine falcons, 40 breeding pairs of kingfishers and 3,000 ringed parakeets."

Which species are you most likely to spot?

"The grey heron. They're almost one metre tall and are quite rare elsewhere."

What makes Amsterdam so ecologically diverse?

"We have always been a trade city, so exotic animals, plants and insects have come via ships for hundreds of years."

Does urban wildlife differ from its country cousins?

"Urban blackbirds have thinner beaks to better reach food stuck in paving. They also sing at a higher pitch to be heard above the hum of traffic."

▶▶ create cities that are completely inhospitable to wildlife," he says.

The feeling is mutual, it seems. Animals love us, or at least the cities we live in. Surprisingly, Hadidian points out that recent US studies have revealed that, in urban areas across the USA, common wildlife species are actually more numerous in cities than in the countryside. He says: "Cities offer good shelter, lots of food and have few threats for animals like raccoons, deer and foxes." Even more surprising is that these days the wilderness is simply too wild for some animals. He tells of a New England moose that recently gave birth on someone's front lawn. "Moose are starting to move to the safety of the city to give birth before going back in the wild with their offspring. We think this is a trend."

While on the one hand animals are increasingly finding their way into cities of their own accord, at the same time there is another trend which sees people actively cultivating pockets of wilderness in towns. Think of 'vertical greenery'. Mere bricks and mortar no longer suffice. These days, any self-respecting urban wall needs to be carpeted with lush layers of plants. These living, breathing verdant façades are mushrooming up all over the place.

Cities are recognising they're not ecological deserts; they have their own unique habitats. To celebrate New York's biodiversity, the Safari 7 project maps out which animals can be found where in a podcast tour along the city's No. 7 subway route, which runs from Times Square to Flushing. It cuts across the city's most diverse range of ecosystems, featuring everything from cormorants, to fish and



chickens. In a similar vein, London city council has launched a website, Wildweb (wildweb.london.gov.uk). They have identified 140 important biodiversity sites featuring rare flora and fauna.

Artist Fritz Haeg takes the idea of the city as a wildlife sanctuary one step further. The former architect designs and builds dwellings for animals, called 'Animal Estates' and sees animals as his 'clients'. "Just like with people, you need to find out how they want to live and try and fulfill their needs," he says. For the Whitney Museum's 2008 biennial exhibition in New York, he created homes for 12 species that would have originally been found at the museum's location 400 years ago, when the Dutch first landed. He built a beaver dam, an enormous eagle's nest and a bobcat den. "We have a responsibility to the animals that were already there, and we need to welcome them back into the city instead of drawing strict boundaries around our cities between us and them," Haeg says.

He has already created wildlife homes in eight cities. In Portland, he built a multi-floored tower to provide shared lodgings for seven species, including bats, snakes and bumble-bees. Last year he was invited to the Dutch city of Utrecht to create a home for the red admiral butterfly and the common swift, among others. He stresses that anyone can build homes to welcome animals back and there are links on his website (www.fritzhaeg.com) explaining how to build them. And so, the call of nature rings clear for cosmopolitan types eager to explore their wilder side; if you want to see the urban jungle untamed, you can start in your own backyard. ◀◀

