

March 1, 2007

Managing Urban Wildlife Becoming Critical in Growing Cities, Suburbs

Writer: Mike Jackson, 972-952-9232, Mcjackson@ag.tamu.edu

Contacts: Fred D. Burrell, 214-904-3050, F-burrell@tamu.edu

John Davis, 972-293-3841, Jmdavis01@aol.com



Angela Dement, a Texas Cooperative Extension assistant, discusses wildlife diseases in Dallas. Dement was a presenter at the Managing Urban Wildlife conference held recently at the Texas A&M University System Research and Extension Center in Dallas. (Texas Cooperative Extension photo by Mike Jackson)

DALLAS – Humans and animals cross paths more than ever in growing Texas cities, wildlife experts say.

Now they have to learn to live together. That's according to wildlife specialists who led seminars recently for the Managing Urban Wildlife conference at the Texas A&M University System Research and Extension Center in Dallas.

Wildlife professionals from the Dallas-Fort Worth area attended for advice on reducing encounters between people and potentially dangerous animals, such as bobcats, coyotes, skunks and raccoons. More than 100 attended the conference, which was hosted by Texas Cooperative Extension and the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

"I think it is a very critical point in time," said Fred Burrell, an Extension agent in Dallas. "We are interdependent. We've got to learn how to co-exist. If our wildlife goes, so goes human life."

Urbanites need direction on re-connecting with urban wildlife, said Dr. Clark Adams, a professor in the department of wildlife and fisheries sciences at Texas A&M University in College Station.

He praised the audience for their interest in educating people about how they affect wildlife in their communities.

"Wildlife in urban areas isn't the problem," Adams said. "People are."

Burrell said anecdotal evidence suggests that uncomfortable encounters between humans and wildlife are on the rise in growing communities. The animals often remain in developed areas after builders turn their habitats into subdivisions.

Coyotes, for instance, thrive in urban and suburban environments, said Brett Johnson, an urban wildlife biologist with Texas Parks and Wildlife.

"They are incredibly adaptable," said Johnson, who works in southern Dallas County. "Their only requirement is that they have to den up within 6 miles of a water source."

Some people become concerned when they see coyotes trotting down alleys or meandering through parks, Johnson said.

Most of the time, however, there is nothing to fear, he said. Coyotes aren't interested in humans. They prey on small mammals and reptiles. They're scavengers that dine on road kill. They also eat persimmon, plums and other fruit.

But coyotes, like other wild animals, will wander close to humans and homes if tempted, Johnson said. The solution: Remove the temptations and the animals will stay away.

Johnson recommends keeping cats and other small pets inside houses. Never feed pets outside because the food will attract unwanted animals. Secure garbage bin covers. Fix holes in fences.

"Encourage people to yell at the coyotes," he told the group. "Clap your hands. Send a stick in its general direction. I'm not talking about hurting it. But nail it with (water from) a water hose. They don't like it."

And never leave food for wild animals or attempt to feed them by hand, Johnson said. Animals will lose their natural fear of humans and eventually bite the hands that feed them.

Angela Dement, an Extension assistant, told the group to encourage pet owners to keep up with vaccinations for their animals. That limits the potential for spreading diseases.

Children should be counseled about approaching animals that might appear to be friendly, she said. She recounted an incident a few years ago in the Houston area, where a boy brought a bat to school. He found it listless on the ground. The bat, it was later discovered, had rabies. With a little education up front, the boy would have known to leave the bat alone, Dement said.

"Bats fly. They don't like the ground," Dement said. "So I tell kids, 'If you see one, don't pick it up.'"

Burrell said that to his knowledge, the urban wildlife conference was the first ever in Texas. He and his counterparts at Texas Parks and Wildlife might make it an annual event.

"When you educate people you have an effect on their actions," he said.