

## Nature Vs. Neighborhoods by Karen Gardner

### Human, Wildlife Living Areas are Increasingly Overlapping

A few months ago, real estate agent Sharon Lapkoff learned a deer was loose on one of her properties in downtown [Frederick](#). Lapkoff was afraid the deer would hurt itself, or run into morning traffic on South Street.

She called animal control agencies, hoping one could trap the large doe and take it to a safer area. What she learned was that agencies are as helpless as she was when it comes to preventing the animal from endangering itself or others.

Wildlife is increasingly a part of life in [Frederick](#) County, even as it becomes more urbanized. Of [Frederick](#) County's 423,000 acres, about one-fourth is preserved or targeted for preservation. Much of the remaining land is farmland and privately owned woodland, but as people build in increasingly rural areas, it is often someone's backyard. Eventually, the deer on Lapkoff's property was startled out of the yard by a neighbor and hopped into the street. Lapkoff doesn't know what happened to it after that.

Deer were once scarce in Maryland. Early European settlers and habitat destruction severely depleted numbers of deer, bears and other large mammals. Before Europeans arrived, wolves, elks, deer and bears were plentiful in this area. Wolves and elks were eliminated and are unlikely to make a comeback, but deer and bears have adapted to modern habitats.

Deer returned in the early 20th century, when hunting was banned. By the 1960s, the population had grown, although the sight of a deer could still produce awe.

Now, not only have deer rebounded, but bears are returning. Michael Clementson studied the increase in bear population in Maryland. Clementson, of [Jefferson](#), is a senior majoring in environmental biology at Mount St. Mary's University. He worked as a park ranger at Catoctin Mountain Park this summer and studied the local bear population.

#### Comeback

[Frederick](#) County was mostly wooded in the 1780s. Settlers chipped away at the forest, using wood to build houses, burn for heat and cooking, and make iron in the region's furnaces. By 1900, almost no forest remained. Hunting depleted many native mammal and bird populations.



That all changed with park and preservation movements. Most of the Catoctin and South Mountain ridges are now preserved.

"This allowed the forest to regrow," Clementson said.

It's good habitat for deer, which like to live on the edge of forests, and bears, which prefer secluded settings. Bears began making a comeback in Maryland in the 1950s, mostly in Garrett and Allegany counties. Clementson estimates there are about 400 to 500 bears in the state today. Last year, bears were sighted 12 times in [Frederick](#) County, 10 in Washington County and one each in Carroll, Howard and Montgomery counties.

"Last year, a bear cub climbed a tree by the [Frederick](#) Towne Mall," Clementson said. Another bear attacked an alpaca, and one was seen raiding a bird feeder in [Jefferson](#).

"Enjoy what you're seeing, but don't encourage it to come back," he said. "Once a bear starts to associate food with humans, that's where you get nuisance bears."

So far, there have been no problems with bears in the county. But people have to do their part, said Harry Spiker, a wildlife biologist with the Oakland field office of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

"It's harder to change a person's behavior than a bear's," Spiker said.

In the fall, bears pack on pounds to sleep through most of winter. They eat mostly nuts and berries they gather in the woods. Bird food provides an easy supply of that.

"We ask that people who see a bear in their bird feeder pull it in for two weeks. That way, the bear comes back and doesn't find it there."



Bears are relatively docile, Spiker said. They're afraid of humans, but if food is repeatedly left out, they will go for the proverbial low-hanging fruit. Bears conserve their energy, and if they smell food in a bird feeder or unsecured garbage can, they will go for it.

Bears aren't necessarily aggressive, but they can seem so if they're going after food, Spiker said. Moving a bear to a different area doesn't solve the problem, he said. Another bear will likely move in.

Spiker and other wildlife biologists suggest people who live in bear country who want to feed the birds limit their feeding to winter.

"If you live in bear country, secure your garbage," Clementson said.

Don't feed pets outside, he said. If bears start to see pets every day, they may become less afraid. Small children shouldn't play outside alone.

He advises people to talk to their neighbors, because all it takes is one food source for a bear to become a presence in a neighborhood. Leaving corn out for deer, a popular practice of those who enjoy viewing deer in their yards, will also draw bears.

"Eighty-five percent of a bear's diet is vegetarian," Clementson said. "They're not very good hunters." Bears are drawn to honey for the larvae and bugs, not the honey.

Bears are making a comeback because forests are being preserved. It's a success story, one that Clementson said he hopes will continue.

#### **Almost too successful**

Deer have adapted to live with humans, said Clementson, a lifelong hunter.

"There's a difference between habitat capacity and human tolerance," he said.

Catoctin Park has a managed deer hunt, while Monocacy National Battlefield is considering a hunt to reduce the deer population. Natural predators for deer, specifically wolves, no longer live in the area.

Deer hunts on private and some state lands are fairly effective at managing deer overpopulation, Spiker said. The population is stabilizing, he said.

But during this time of year, drivers traveling at dusk and dawn must be particularly wary of deer on the move. Male deer spend the fall months looking to reproduce.

DNR has introduced a limited bear hunt Oct. 26 to 31 in Garrett and Allegany counties.

#### **Habitat for what?**

"We created the suburban habitat," said Eric Kindahl, associate professor of biology at Hood College.

"I would hope that people who build in (rural) areas are more tolerant," he said. It may mean not planting certain plants that appeal to deer, or not feeding birds in the summer.

One mammal may already be in plentiful supply in the county: the coyote. Although not historically a Maryland native, the absence of wolves has allowed them to move in. Coyotes are in the same biological family as wolves and foxes.

"They go unnoticed," Kindahl said. "I wouldn't be surprised if they are living all over."

They have been documented in every county in Maryland, Spiker said. A coyote is 30 to 50 pounds, but has so much fur it looks larger. Like deer, they move at night. They are silent. They eat mostly rodents, and the occasional baby deer.

#### **What to do when paths collide**

An injured creature evokes sympathy, said Christine Montuori, director of Second Chance Wildlife Refuge in Gaithersburg.

"The more people, the more development, the more roads, the more likely people and wildlife conflict," she said.

Wildlife centers like hers step in, but it's difficult. Donations foot the bill for what can be expensive veterinary care. "There are no government agencies that will do anything to help distressed animals," she said. Natural resources officials have limited hours, which mean deer hit by cars often take days to die.

Her center is equipped to help small mammals, birds and reptiles -- not deer. Still, she gets many phone calls from people like Lapkoff, asking for help.

"It's a horrible position to put people in," she said. "We don't take responsibility for what happens, and don't provide any kind of relief. Progress, and development, isn't going to stop. The least we can do is provide help when something does happen."

