



OPPOSITE PAGE:
By November, white-tailed deer are entering their rut, or breeding season, and adult males sport fully developed antlers. This 8-point buck was sleeping with his rack resting on his shoulder in the middle of the day when encountered. After the photos he resettled 20 yards away and continued his rest.



Eastern Tiger Swallowtail



Monarch

ARLINGTON, NATURALLY

What can you see just walking around Arlington, Virginia, paying attention? Our wild neighbors.

By David Howell

David Howell, a retired federal executive, is an amateur naturalist, and currently serves on the Arlington, Virginia, Park and Recreation Commission.

Among the many benefits of an urban area's natural spaces are the fascination and enrichment that come from sharing them with urban wildlife. But unlike a typical arrangement to meet friends or colleagues, seeing wildlife doesn't happen by appointment. The urban resident's ability to observe wildlife—from butterflies to birds to reptiles to mammals—depends largely on

the when, where, and how of observation. And, perhaps—a little serendipity.

First and foremost, it is important to recognize that locally resident wildlife has evolved in an intimate relationship with locally native plants. For many wildlife species, genetically programmed instincts and biochemical adaptations determine preferences for certain plants as food and shelter. This is true for most insects, and affects, directly or indirectly, much of the food chain hierarchy as well.

For individual and species existence, native wildlife often depends on the availability of appropriate evolutionary partners.

How is this important to the hopeful urban wildlife lover? Start with the notion that an abundance of native plants is a basic requirement. A picture-perfect subdivision with imported ornamental trees and smooth turf lawns maintained by regular infusions of chemicals is no welcoming harbor for native fauna. But parks, trails, neighborhoods and even utility corridors—if they contain



Buckeye



Red-Banded Hairstreak

Butterflies are numerous and varied in appearance—a delight to the eye—and they are found mostly where their preferred native food sources are present. Many of these plants are easy to grow, requiring little if any care.

trees, woody plants, flowers, and grasses that are native to the area—are all recognizable habitat for locally adapted wildlife.

Three winters ago, I decided to explore the possibility of seeing and photographing the diverse wildlife in the parks and neighborhoods of Arlington, Virginia. As the weeks and months elapsed and the seasons progressed, the potential to find wildlife improved, as did my amateurish naturalist skills. A long-time Arlington resident and lifelong biophile, I found the endeavor captivating and rewarding.

Over time, my occasional nature walks became more routine, and then a defined project. Its premise was to illustrate what residents might observe “just walking around and paying attention.” In these three years, I have captured images of more than 250 wildlife species in their natural environs. Yet the number of species documented is only a fraction

of all wildlife known to reside in or periodically visit Arlington, according to a [three-year field study](#) published by Arlington County’s Department of Parks and Recreation in 2011.

Arlington County is the Virginia portion of a ten-by-ten mile diamond that was the original District of Columbia. At twenty-six square miles, it is the smallest county in the United States, but it is embedded in the center one of the largest metropolitan areas. Bounded by the Potomac River on its longest border, Arlington features about forty-percent tree canopy, and is transected by several streams and former railroad right-of-ways. While eighteen percent of the land is considered open space, only a little more than four percent is classified as “natural land.” A combination of topography, historical circumstance, forward-thinking interests, and good stewardship has helped to protect and restore some of

Arlington’s natural spaces.

Arlington’s visual wildlife palette is both varied and variable. One of the truest and most exciting aspects of nature watching is the lack of certainty about what will be found. With a little dedication, one can learn from experts and personal experiences, but there is always an element of serendipity to every field exercise. On occasion, I have walked trails for three hours and come up with absolutely nothing to photograph. However, on one particular day, I gathered more than 200 images in the same amount of time. These included migrating tundra swans, sparring white-tailed deer bucks, a red fox sunning, a belted kingfisher hunting in a stream, a stalking green heron, a red-tailed hawk scoping out the landscape, a diving Cooper’s hawk, as well as multiple species of turtles and woodpeckers.



A red fox sits pensively in an urban park. With young kits to feed in spring, foxes may extend their hunting excursions into mid-morning or begin them in late afternoon.



A female raccoon pauses high in a tree after escaping a territorial dispute with another raccoon. Raccoon resourcefulness is legendary.

When seeking wild neighbors to observe, the observer is often also the observed. How to handle those encounters can determine success. Wildlife is generally wary, but wariness can depend on context. Sometimes what you do matters, and sometimes it does not seem to matter very much at all.

Once, while standing next to—almost in, actually—a head-high bush along a barely discernible wildlife path for the purpose of having a good vantage point to observe migrating warblers in nearby trees, my peripheral vision picked up motion to my left. I glanced sideways in time to see a red fox trotting toward me on the path, not forty feet away, before the fox even noticed me. My slight movement was enough to cause it to pause and then divert at right angles. Barely breaking eye contact,

the fox crossed a small ravine and then sat facing me in a classic portrait pose. After thirty seconds of locked-eye gazes and numerous photos, I slowly disengaged and returned to the main path. On the way, I looked back and the fox was gone.

A glimpse is enticing, but the chance to see meaningful action—wildlife doing what they do to survive—is a greater reward. One morning, I heard a serious racket from high up in the trees of our neighborhood park. It took a few moments to locate the source. Two raccoons stood facing each other on a limb about thirty feet high, arguing over squatters rights. After a ten-minute standoff, that included much noise and posturing, one raccoon backed down to a major fork, ascended a different limb, and climbed up to a point where crossing over to another tree was possible.

Then it peered down at me as if to say, “Uh...I meant to do that.” Raccoons are extremely resourceful omnivores, and a notable presence in many urban areas. Like other urbanites, they often feel the pinch of population density.

Many species found in Arlington are permanent residents. Many others are seasonal residents, spending summers or winters elsewhere, or are visitors, merely passing through on annual migratory journeys. Among serious birders, the anticipated schedules and actual appearances of these long-distance travelers are tracked closely in real time. Cedar waxwings and scarlet tanagers, for example, along with many warblers on their way to breeding territory in the northern half of the continent, will arrive in waves in the mid-spring, feeding frenetically by



A female eastern box turtle emerges from a woody area onto a neighborhood sidewalk in late spring. Box turtles can seal themselves in their shell for protection from many predators, but are still vulnerable to mowers, cars, and other machinery.



A red-shouldered hawk calls to its mate while air-drying after a spring bath in a stream just a few feet away. This is one of a pair that has nested in the same wooded area for several years.

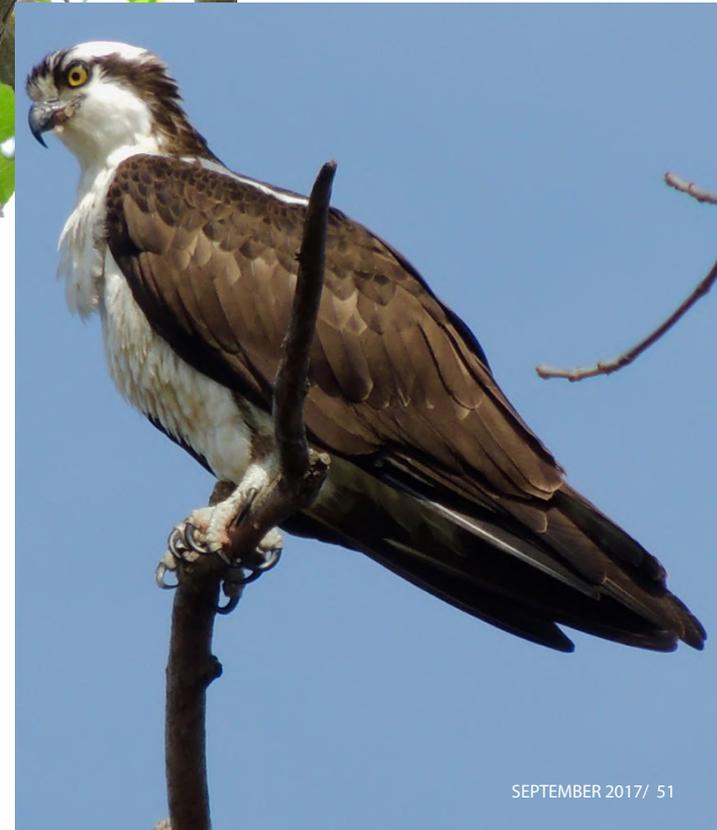


The barred owl, the second largest owl in North America, hunts mostly at night, when it has major advantages. During the day, owls generally try to roost unobtrusively to avoid harassment from crows, blue jays, and other birds.



Great blue herons forage along river shores and inland streams and ponds during much of the year. They hunt fish, frogs, and other aquatic creatures, generally in shallow water, and also roost in nearby trees.

The osprey is a large raptor with a five to six-foot wingspan, commonly found along waterways in many areas of the country. Feeding almost exclusively on fish, ospreys glide, hover, and dive for prey, displaying admirable skill and purpose, but are impressive birds even when perched.





Scarlet tanager

Many migratory birds spend winters in Central and South America, and on Caribbean islands, returning in the spring to North America to breed. Migrations provide opportunities to appreciate the beauty and capabilities of these long-distance commuters.



Cedar waxwing

day to travel safely by night. A species may arrive by the hundreds or thousands in our region and be gone in a matter of a week or two.

Before most birds are moving, wood frogs, who live all year in the leaf litter and topsoil layers of wooded areas and survive in part because their body fluids contain a type of natural antifreeze, make an annual trek to vernal pools in order to breed. This takes place after dark in late February and March, depending on weather. Within a couple of weeks, the adults have returned to the woods. The eggs remain in place, destined to become tadpoles, and then tiny frogs, and then to enter the woods for the first time before the temporary bodies of water have dried up in mid-summer.

In an urban area, breeding wood frogs often need protection during their nocturnal travels. Instinctively, nights are better than days for avoiding predators; except that evolution has not yet taken cars into account. Every year, Arlington naturalists and volunteers monitor small roads and lanes in several parks during this event, serving as a safety patrol to help prevent amphibian deaths. This service also provides an excellent opportunity to photograph these amazing creatures on their most important mission.

My nature walks are almost exclusively solo. On rare occasions, I invite someone to join me, and once in a while I join others, especially birders,



Wood frogs emerge from the woods in early spring in a mass migration to vernal pools and shallow ponds to mate. The cacophony of quack-like male calls rises and ebbs as they compete to attract egg-laden females, such as this one, who is crossing a park entrance road near her destination.

to learn from experts who have substantial knowledge and experience. But, seldom do I return from an excursion without having at least a few exchanges with other park users. People of all ages enjoy the wild side of Arlington parks. Commuter bikers, parents with children, retirees, joggers, and school-age youths all can and do see local wildlife when their senses are engaged.

It is not uncommon for residents in many parts of Arlington to see wildlife. Neighborhood conversations and social media sometimes contain reports of recent sightings. Occasionally, they document rare appearances, such as a wild turkey, a bobcat, a coyote, a bald eagle, or a copperhead, all seen in Arlington in the past year. Nature is a common denominator among these residents because, whether we recognize it or not, we are all of nature, and share with

each other and with wildlife an affinity for natural spaces and a common innate ancestral experience.

It is necessary for urban communities to recognize that nature and culture are not incompatible. Biophilic and aspiring biophilic cities integrate these intentionally and successfully. Their residents, in turn, thrive in this full-spectrum environment, engaging directly with their natural outdoor spaces and co-existing with their wild neighbors on an everyday basis. The result is a rewards program unlike any other.

Resources

Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources (July 2011). Wildlife of Arlington: A Natural Heritage Resources Inventory Technical Report. Arlington, Virginia. Retrieved from <https://projects.arlingtonva.us/wildlife-arlington>.



Blue-gray gnatcatcher



Yellow warbler