



## Sharing Our World: Coexisting with Wildlife

### Churchill Area Environmental Council Spring 2024 Advisory

Coexisting with backyard wildlife offers meaningful connection to the natural world right outside our doors. Understanding biodiversity allows us to witness the behaviors of our wild neighbors, creating a deeper appreciation for nature.

If you want to focus on humane and eco-friendly methods for pest and wildlife control, this can involve prevention, habitat modification, repellents, and exclusion techniques that address issues without causing harm to animals or the environment. A combination of these methods will be more effective. Coexisting with a diverse range of wildlife will contribute to a more balanced ecosystem, with predator species serving as natural pest population control.

#### White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginiana*)

In the early 1900s, [whitetails were nearly eliminated from PA](#). Conservation efforts and excellent habitat made this now abundant species a conservation success story!



**Feeding Habits:** Whitetail deer are herbivores. They can be attracted to gardens, but find certain vegetation less palatable. To discourage deer, grow lavender, rosemary, thyme, sage, marigolds, lamb's ear, daffodils, or ferns among your plantings.

**Urban "Temptations":** Deer enjoy easy meals, so combining deterrent methods will improve your chances of a deer-free yard. Try perimeter fencing, netting over bushes, incorporating thorny or prickly plants, using eco-friendly yard sprays such as Liquid Fence, or a simple DIY spice spray (mix minced garlic, chili peppers, and water, then strain and spray around yard). Note that many of the ways to deter deer will also deter groundhogs.

**Ecological Benefits:** Whitetail deer play a crucial role in the ecosystem by controlling plant populations and shaping forests through grazing. Scattering seeds in their droppings, deer also add to plant diversity and renewal.

## **Coyotes** (*Canis latrans*)

Coyotes are relative newcomers to PA forests, having [arrived from more western populations in the 1950s](#). Along the way they mated with their close relatives, gray wolves and domestic dogs. Today, all Eastern coyotes have some wolf and some dog ancestry.



**Feeding Habits:** Coyotes are opportunistic feeders with a varied diet that includes small mammals, birds, insects, fruits, and carrion. They are attracted to areas with abundant food sources like open garbage bins.

**Urban "Temptations":** Contrary to social media misinformation, coyotes do NOT lure pets as prey, and simply seeing one is not reason for alarm. However, they are dedicated parents that will defend pups and dens in areas that our animals may explore. Especially in the late spring, keep dogs leashed and away from log piles or burrows where wildlife may nest!

**Ecological Benefits:** Coyotes are necessary to balance healthy deer populations in PA. Additionally, coyotes provide free rodent control, taking advantage of rats and mice in urban areas.

## **Raccoons** (*Procyon lotor*)

Raccoons have [incredibly dexterous front paws and a highly tuned sense of touch that they use to investigate items in their environment](#). They often thoroughly manipulate food items before eating, a habit that led to the second part of their scientific name (lotor means "washer").



**Feeding Habits:** Raccoons are omnivores and consume a wide range of food: fruits, nuts, insects, small mammals, birds, eggs, and human garbage.

**Urban "Temptations":** Intelligent raccoons often take advantage of shelter and easy meals inadvertently provided by humans. Fortunately, we can discourage this behavior by securing trash and composts with tight fitting lids and making sure access to attics, basements, and sheds are blocked. Urban raccoons are more likely to become active during the daytime as they become acclimated to human neighbors. Please do not feed wildlife- even well intended "help" is detrimental to a raccoon's ability to survive independently.

**Ecological Benefits:** Raccoons act as unsung "clean up" crews, removing carrion and dead animals from urban areas. Though unappetizing to us, a raccoon's resourceful diet actually helps stop the spread of disease and remove waste from our landscape.

*Raccoons, deer, and coyotes all provide vital ecological services such as pest control and maintaining biodiversity. We owe it to them to be good neighbors through understanding and taking simple steps to prevent conflict. Through understanding and peaceful co-existence, we can find balance and enjoy the wonders of nature in our area.*

## How can we help ALL wildlife?

1. Keep pets contained for everyone's safety. Over 90% of wildlife-pet encounters involve an off leash dog. Domestic cats are responsible for **billions** of songbird deaths each year.
2. Know when and where to expect wildlife activity so you can avoid negative interactions, including vehicle collisions. Many animals travel in low light (at dusk and dawn). Anticipate roadway crossings and walk dogs with caution.
3. Secure your trash and do not litter. Loose trash and food waste draws wildlife into dangerous situations (like getting your head trapped in a peanut butter jar).
4. Never feed wildlife. With the exception of bird feeders, supplying food for wildlife enhances the risk of disease (especially for deer), increases the chance of human-wildlife conflict, and may be illegal. Check to see what state or municipal regulations apply to you.



## Local Resources

- **Wild Animals:**

- Have a groundhog in your garden or a raccoon in your garbage? Trapping can be an option. Before deciding to trap, make sure you have a humane and legal plan to fully deal with any animal you may capture!
  - You are responsible for the well-being or killing and disposal of any animal you capture
  - Traps should never be left unattended for more than 12 hours.
  - Due to legal restrictions on moving wildlife and increased disease risks, trapped wildlife should usually be euthanized.
  - Remember that removing an individual animal will not keep others of the same species from coming into your yard. The best solution is to remove temptations and make your property less hospitable.
  - You can find more information about [trapping nuisance wildlife from the PA Game Commission](#).
- In **Wilkins**, the Police department can loan you a trap at no charge for up to two weeks. Traps are limited and are loaned on a first come, first served basis. For more information, call the Police non-emergency number 412-824-0032.
- Small animal traps are also available on loan for any Allegheny County residents to control nuisance wildlife on personal property. To make an appointment for a consultation or to find out if traps are available, call 412-350-4046.
- Some additional resources can found here:
  - [Three rivers wildlife control](#)
  - [Pittsburgh wildlife management](#)
  - [Critter control of Pittsburgh](#)
  - [Steel City Wildlife Control](#)

- **Injured or sick animals:**

- If you find an injured, rabid, or dead animal on your property, **do not approach the animal**. Please contact your PA Game Commission regional office.
  - [PGC Southwest Region](#) — 724-238-9523 or 724-238-9524 or email [pgc-swregion@pa.gov](mailto:pgc-swregion@pa.gov)
  - Please report sightings of dead crows, blue jays, hawks, owls, falcons, ravens, or buzzards to the Pennsylvania Department of Health using their online [Report a Dead Bird Form](#). This helps the state keep track of any possible West Nile infections.
  - [Wildlife in Need](#) is a capture and delivery service for injured, orphaned and sick wildlife.

- **Feral Cats:**
  - Lost or abandoned pet cats which are not spayed or neutered produce litters of kittens that become feral cats.
  - Feral cats are unused to human contact, typically live in colonies with other feral cats, and tend to be territorial. They seek out areas that provide food and shelter, such as dumpsters and porches.
  - Feral cats (and domestic cats allowed outdoors) are a [major strain on healthy songbird and small mammal communities](#). **You should *always* keep your pet cats indoors unless they are supervised and harnessed!**
  - Our municipalities do not have a policy or program for eliminating feral cat colonies. However, residents are encouraged to contact one of a number of groups, such as the [Humane Animal Rescue](#) or the [Homeless Cat Management Team](#).
  
- **Domestic dogs:**
  - All four municipalities contract with Hoffman Kennels for stray dog collection and disposition. They can be reached at 724-486-5505.
    - **Chalfant** residents should contact Hoffman Kennels.
    - **Forest Hills** and **Churchill** residents should call the borough office first.
    - **Wilkins** residents can either call the Police non-emergency number (412-824-0032) or contact Hoffman Kennels.
  
- Please note that *nuisance animal control* and *animal rescue* are not synonymous. Residents should consider the difference when seeking help.
  - The biggest differences between control and rescue are the associated costs and the policies regarding animal euthanasia.

## **Being a good neighbor**

While we tend to focus on issues that wildlife can create for us, it is important to remember that the issues we create for wildlife are often much more severe. All of the species commonly seen as “nuisance” species are simply trying to make a living in a world that is very different from what they are best suited to live in. Whether that is because of [roads cutting through their habitat](#), the large turfgrass lawn [where their favorite hangout once was](#), or the [domestic cat hunting them for fun](#), urban and suburban areas create a gauntlet for the animals we share the landscape with.

Perhaps the best way to learn to live in harmony with our furry and feathered neighbors is to spend some time getting to know them.

Humans have a long history of observing and recording nature wherever we find it. In fact, much of our foundational knowledge of the natural world was built by people doing exactly that. Naturalist Thomas Fleischner described “a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy” as the oldest human tradition.

Whether you want to appreciate the diversity of life forms around you, understand what it’s like to be a red-tailed hawk living in Wilkins, or try to prevent the deer from raiding the garden you’ve toiled over, keeping tabs on who your visitors are will help you achieve those aims. Taking the time to intentionally immerse yourself in nature has also shown to be [good for your mental and physical health!](#)

### Some tips for nature observation

- **Keep a regular schedule** – Make it a point to observe who visits the tree in your backyard for 10 minutes each morning while you enjoy your coffee, or take a walk through the neighborhood a couple evenings each week and note how many different kinds of animals you see, and where. Whatever works for your schedule, just try to be consistent.
- **Be patient, calm, and aware** – Your very presence in an area can alter animal behaviors and change who and what you can see. Any animals who notice you may continue to be wary and hidden for up to 30 minutes! As you observe your surroundings, try to have your *sphere of sensory awareness* be larger than your *sphere of influence*. Use all your senses. Really make an effort to just exist in that world in that moment.
- **Record your observations** – Keeping a nature journal is a great way to uncover patterns in what wildlife species visit your spaces and when. Make note of dates, times of day, weather conditions, and any other circumstances that may be of interest.
- **Be a community scientist** – There are many apps that allow you to increase your knowledge of local wildlife and log your own personal observations. Some even allow you to contribute your observations to regional or national research projects!
  - [iNaturalist](#) – a smartphone app that lets you post photos of your observations. If you’re not sure what species you saw, a large expert community is available to help accurately identify the photos you post. You can also explore what others in your community have observed in the area. The Churchill Valley Greenway is a hot spot for local observations! Many scientists use iNaturalist as a data source to study species distributions and behaviors.
  - [Seek](#) – Uses your smartphone’s camera to instantly suggest what animal, plant, or fungus you’re observing. You have the option to connect your

Seek account to iNaturalist for help or confirmation with identification of trickier species. You can also opt to contribute your Seek observations to iNaturalist's database.

- [Audubon Bird Guide](#) - great app for identification and logging of bird sightings. It has an *Identify a bird* function that allows you to put in your location and some characteristics of what you saw (color, behavior, size, etc.) and then it suggests probable species. It's great if you only caught a fleeting glimpse of an individual.
- [Merlin bird ID](#) - another great birding app from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. It has a *Sound ID* function, which allows you to create audio recordings of your surroundings while it listens for bird songs and suggests what species are singing nearby!
- Did you find a loose feather and want to know what bird species it came from? The US Fish and Wildlife Service [Feather Atlas](#) can help!
- Maybe you did not see an animal, but you noticed signs of their presence such as tracks, hairs, or scat? The [Princeton guide to animal tracking](#) website offers helpful tips for identifying sign of common species.

We are lucky to cohabitate with a very healthy, diverse, and dynamic wildlife community. Not many communities in the region can say that, at least not to the extent that we can! While it can be frustrating to have annoying or occasionally destructive neighbors, it is important to remember that they belong here too. The only way to sustain a thriving community is for us all to be good neighbors.



*Images, clockwise from upper left: Red foxes are common inhabitants of suburban areas; Ermines are weasels that are efficient predators of mice and other small mammals; fox squirrels are the largest tree squirrels in PA and are usually reddish in color; the Virginia opossum is the only native marsupial in North America. All images were taken in Churchill borough in 2023-24.*

To learn more about the mammals who live with us, go to [PA Mammals](#).



**Churchill Area Environmental Council (CAEC)** is an eco-minded organization dedicated to assessing and improving the environmental impact of the communities in Chalfant, Churchill, Forest Hills, and Wilkins. Each municipality appoints 2 representatives to the council.

Our goals are to:

1. advise member municipalities and residents on matters of environmental interest and importance.
2. publish advisories regarding timely environmental issues affecting our communities, which are made available for distribution by participating municipalities.
3. support and encourage local students' interest in environmental, ecological, or sustainability issues.

If you'd like to participate in CAEC, contact [churchillareaenvcouncil@gmail.com](mailto:churchillareaenvcouncil@gmail.com) for more information and to join our next meeting! Regular meetings are held in April and October, with occasional "workshop meetings" as needed to discuss ongoing duties. We have openings for representatives from each of our member municipalities.

Follow us on Instagram [@churchill\\_env](https://www.instagram.com/churchill_env) for updates, neighborhood event announcements, and eco-friendly tips for enjoying and protecting our environment!



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