

## America Gone Wild

**The good news: Wildlife populations in the U.S. have experienced an astonishing resurgence. The bad news: All those animals are now our neighbors.**

By Jim Sterba  
Nov. 2, 2012 8:08 p.m. ET

This year, Princeton, N.J., has hired sharpshooters to cull 250 deer from the town's herd of 550 over the winter. The cost: \$58,700. Columbia, S.C., is spending \$1 million to rid its drainage systems of beavers and their dams. The 2009 "miracle on the Hudson," when US Airways flight 1549 had to make an emergency landing after its engines ingested Canada geese, saved 155 passengers and crew, but the \$60 million A320 Airbus was a complete loss. In the U.S., the total cost of wildlife damage to crops, landscaping and infrastructure now exceeds \$28 billion a year (\$1.5 billion from deer-vehicle crashes alone), according to Michael Conover of Utah State University, who monitors conflicts between people and wildlife.

Those conflicts often pit neighbor against neighbor. After a small dog in Wheaton, Ill., was mauled by a coyote and had to be euthanized, officials hired a nuisance wildlife mitigation company. Its operator killed four coyotes and got voice-mail death threats. A brick was tossed through a city official's window, city-council members were peppered with threatening emails and letters, and the FBI was called in. After Princeton began culling deer 12 years ago, someone splattered the mayor's car with deer innards.

Welcome to the nature wars, in which Americans fight each other over too much of a good thing—expanding wildlife populations produced by our conservation and environmental successes. We now routinely encounter wild birds and animals that our parents and grandparents rarely saw. As their numbers have grown, wild creatures have spread far beyond their historic ranges into new habitats, including ours. It is very likely that in the eastern United States today more people live in closer proximity to more wildlife than anywhere on Earth at any time in history.

In a world full of eco-woes like species extinctions, this should be wonderful news—unless, perhaps, you are one of more than 4,000 drivers who will hit a deer today, or your child's soccer field is carpeted with goose droppings, or feral cats have turned your bird feeder into a fast-food outlet, or wild turkeys have eaten your newly planted seed corn, or beavers have flooded your driveway, or bears are looting your trash cans. And that's just the beginning.

Jim Sterba, author of the new book "Nature Wars," discusses the amazing resurgence of wildlife in America-and the problems that it has created for suburbanites-with WSJ's Gary Rosen.

In just a few decades we have turned a wildlife comeback miracle into a mess that's getting messier, and costlier. How did this happen? The simple answer: Forests grew back over the past two centuries, wildlife came back over the past century and people sprawled across the landscape over the past half-century.

Reforestation began in 19th-century New England, when farmers started abandoning marginal pastures and buying cheap feed grain from the rich, relatively flat lands on the other end of the newly opened Erie Canal. Later, petroleum-based fertilizers and gasoline-powered machinery made Midwestern farming more productive and draft animals obsolete, freeing up 70 million acres that were being used to feed them. Many farmers, meanwhile, opted for jobs in town. Trees took back much of their land and, after World War II, nonfarmers began moving onto it.

Today, the eastern third of the country has the largest forest in the contiguous U.S., as well as two-thirds of its people. Since the 19th century, forests have grown back to cover 60% of the land within this area. In New England, an astonishing 86.7% of the land that was forested in 1630 had been reforested by 2007, according to the U.S. Forest Service. Not since the collapse of Mayan civilization 1,200 years ago has reforestation on this scale happened in the Americas, says David Foster, director of the Harvard Forest, an ecology research unit of Harvard University. In 2007, forests covered 63.2% of Massachusetts and 58% of Connecticut, the third and fourth most densely populated states in the country, not counting forested suburban and exurban sprawl (though a lot of sprawl has enough trees to be called a real forest if people and their infrastructure weren't there).

Some 350 years of unbridled exploitation of wild birds and animals for feathers, furs, hides and food by commercial market-hunters and settlers escalated into a late 19th-century rampage that turned wild populations into remnants. It all started with a 50-pound rodent.

The "fur trade" is a feeble euphemism for the massacre of beavers, America's first commodity animal. By the late 19th century, a population once estimated at as many as 400 million was down to perhaps 100,000, mostly in the Canadian outback. By 1894, the largest forest left in the eastern U.S., the Adirondacks, was down to a single family of five beavers.

Beyond beavers, by 1890, a pre-Columbian whitetail deer population of perhaps 30 million had been reduced to an estimated 350,000. Ten million wild turkeys had been reduced to no more than 30,000 by 1920. Geese and ducks were migrating remnants. Bears, wolves and other "vermin" were all but gone. The passenger pigeon would soon be extinct. The feathered skins of hummingbirds, used to make women's bonnets, sold for two cents apiece.

With toothless laws and lax enforcement, the carnage was slow to end. But conservationists slowly gained strength. Elected governor of New York in 1898, Theodore Roosevelt was so incensed that plume-hunters were killing egrets, whooping cranes and other exotic shore birds for women's hats that he outlawed their sale in his state and went on, as president, to create the first federal wildlife refuges and national forests.

Restocking wildlife was a mixed bag. In 1907, 50 Michigan white-tailed deer were shipped to Pennsylvania. Eleven years later, foresters and truck farmers there were complaining about "too many deer"—a phrase uttered to this day. In many places, however, seeing a deer (or a goose) in the 1950s and '60s was still so rare it made the local newspaper.

## Beavers

- **Pre-Columbian period:** 50 million to 400 million
- **1900:**100,000
- **Today:**6 million to 12 million

Source: 'Nature Wars'

Between 1901 and 1907, 34 beavers from Canada were released in the Adirondacks. With no predators and no trapping, they grew to 15,000 by 1915. Today they are almost everywhere that water flows and trees grow. Beavers are wonderful eco-engineers, a so-called keystone species building dams that create wetlands that benefit countless other species, filter pollutants, reduce erosion and control seasonal flooding. The trouble is, they share our taste in waterfront real estate but not in landscaping. We put in a driveway, they flood it. We plant expensive trees, they chew them down. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that the cost of beaver damage may exceed that of any other wild species.

Bringing back ducks and geese was slow going. Commercial and sport hunters long kept live birds (in addition to wooden facsimiles) as decoys to lure migrating waterfowl. The use of these live flocks wasn't outlawed until 1935. They hadn't migrated in generations. The outlaw birds were used to stock newly created refuges in the hope that they would join migrating flocks and help them to grow. But they stayed put. Their descendants include the four million or so resident Canada geese that now occupy golf courses, parks, athletic fields, corporate lawns and airline flight paths.

The founders of the conservation movement would have been astonished to learn that by the 2000 Census, a majority of Americans lived not in cities or on working farms but in that vast doughnut of sprawl in between. They envisioned neither sprawl nor today's conflicts between people and wildlife. The assertion by animal protectionists that these conflicts are our fault because we encroached on wildlife habitat is only half the story. As our population multiplies and spreads, many wild creatures encroach right back—even species thought to be people-shy, such as wild turkeys and coyotes. (In Chicago alone, there are an estimated 2,000 coyotes.)

Why? Our habitat is better than theirs. We offer plenty of food, water, shelter and protection. We plant grass, trees, shrubs and gardens, put out birdseed, mulch and garbage.

Sprawl supports a lot more critters than a people-free forest does. For many species, sprawl's biological carrying capacity—the population limit the food and habitat can sustain—is far greater than a forest's. Its ecological carrying capacity (the point at which a species adversely affects the habitat and the other animals and plants in it) isn't necessarily greater. The rub for many species is what's called social carrying capacity, which is subjective. It means the point at which the

damage a creature does outweighs its benefits in the public mind. And that's where many battles in today's wildlife wars start.

What to do? Learn to live with them? Move them? Fool them into going away? Sterilize them? Kill them? For every option and every creature there is a constituency. We have bird lovers against cat lovers; people who would save beavers from cruel traps and people who would save yards and roads from beaver flooding; Bambi saviors versus forest and garden protectors.

Wildlife biologists say that we should be managing our ecosystems for the good of all inhabitants, including people. Many people don't want to and don't know how. We have forsaken not only our ancestors' destructive ways but much of their hands-on nature know-how as well. Our knowledge of nature arrives on screens, where wild animals are often packaged to act like cuddly little people that our Earth Day instincts tell us to protect. Animal rights people say killing, culling, lethal management, "human-directed mortality" or whatever euphemism you choose is inhumane and simply creates a vacuum that more critters refill. By that logic, why pull garden weeds or trap basement rats?

### **White-tailed deer**

- **Pre-Columbian period:** 30 million
- **1900:** 350,000
- **Today:** 25 million to 40 million

Source: 'Nature Wars'

People against killing usually advocate wildlife birth control. Practical and affordable contraception for deer was said to be just around the corner 30 years ago. It still is. You can dart female deer living in a confined area (behind a fence, on an island) with PZP (porcine zona pellucid) for \$25 per dose plus hundreds of dollars per animal per year to set up and run the program. For free-ranging deer, forget it. You can feed OvoControl to Canada geese to stop their eggs from hatching for \$12 per goose per season. Do the math.

For feral cats, the panacea is called trap-neuter-return: The cats are trapped (not easy), sterilized and then returned to where they were caught. Voilà, no more feral kittens! Even the American Veterinary Medical Association calls this a mirage because "an insignificant percentage" of 60 to 90 million ferals out there at any one time have been neutered to reduce their overall population. And "returning" these nonnative predators to the landscape drives bird protection groups up the wall.

Some people advocate bringing back natural predators, as if they really want wolves and cougars roaming the sprawl. But they overlook a deer predator that is already there: us. Indeed, research suggests that since the last ice age the top predator of deer has been man. But by blanketing sprawl with firearms restrictions and hunting prohibitions in the name of safety we have taken ourselves out of the predation business in just a few decades. Suddenly, for the first time in 11,000 years, we have put hundreds of thousands of square miles in the heart of the white-tailed deer's historic range off-limits to its biggest predator.

In Massachusetts, it is illegal to discharge a firearm within 150 feet of a hard-surfaced road or within 500 feet of an occupied dwelling without the owner's written permission. These restrictions alone put about 60% of the state off-limits to hunting with guns. And nearly half of its 351 municipalities impose more restrictions, including on bow hunters. Many states and towns have similar restrictions.

Local governments are increasingly hiring sharpshooters to cull deer, and homeowners retain nuisance wildlife controllers (trappers) to kill beavers, geese, coyotes and whatever is in the attic. Bryon Shissler, president of Natural Resources Consultants in Fort Hill, Pa., who consults on deer problems with towns, corporations and property owners, sometimes recommends hiring sharpshooters to cull herds. He also thinks towns could train local hunters (typically cops and firefighters) to sharp shoot and then recoup town costs by selling the venison at local farm markets. It is illegal, however, to sell any truly wild game in America today. But that could change.

After decades of decline, the number of hunters in the U.S. grew 9% from 2006 to 2011, according to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service survey. But they remain outcasts in many of the places where they are needed most because they are thought to be unsafe. Even that, however, may be changing. Some towns are becoming more tolerant of hunters than of deer, noting that while guns kill 31,000 Americans a year, hunters kill only about 100, mostly each other. Deer, on the other hand, kill upward of 250 people a year—drivers and passengers—and hospitalize 30,000 more. Some communities screen hunters, allowing them to use only bows and arrows and shotguns that have limited ranges.

One encouraging example is Weston, Mass., in suburban Boston, a town with a serious deer problem. Brian Donahue, associate professor of environmental studies at Brandeis University, serves on the town's conservation commission, which decided to try controlled bow hunting this fall. He sees some of his liberal suburban neighbors coming to believe that "hunting is good—one of the best, most responsible forms of stewardship of nature," he says.

"Maybe I'm dreaming," he adds, "but hunters are the new suburban heroes."

—Adapted from "Nature Wars: The Incredible Story of How Wildlife Comebacks Turned Backyards into Battlegrounds" by Jim Sterba, to be published Nov. 13 by Crown Publishers, a division of Random House Inc.