

BRIDGING THE GAPS

How neighborhood preserves help migrating wildlife

BY REBECCA LEXA

Ecologist and author Douglas Tallamy proposes in his writing the concept of a homegrown national park. Rather than depend on large swaths of land held in trust for the public, this preservation concept proposes that privately owned yards, gardens and farms can be set aside for native wildlife, providing crucial oases.

These neighborhood preserves can bridge important gaps between public lands, because while 40% of U.S. land is designated as public, much of that land has been taken up by accessible resources. Nearby residents have also rerouted resources like water to accommodate neighborhoods in less hospitable locations.

Many public lands are also not ideal for some animals and plants, whether they're too hot, too cold or simply inaccessible. Logging, mining and other extractive activities are also allowed on some public lands, while others are consistently busy with visitors. Some charismatic megafauna like grizzly bears, bison and gray wolves have territories spanning hundreds of miles. These animals are not tolerant of human encroachment, and many public lands are simply not large enough for them.

This means that native species are often cut off from one another in isolated habitats. As human development and activity push them further away from one another, each population loses genetic diversity, weakening the entire species. Animals with smaller territories, too, move around throughout their lifetime, and while the movement of genes throughout such a population may be slower, it remains necessary. Plants and fungi need to be able to spread their seeds and spores on the wind, but if these land on inhospitable soil, or pavement, then they won't grow into a new generation. Mammals and other land animals also need safe routes to travel, with some species migrating across hundreds or even thousands of miles. Migrating birds need places to land



Photos by Rebecca Lexa

LEFT: The Northern red-legged frog, seen atop grass and leaves. **MIDDLE:** Slough sedge thrives in salty environments like the North Coast. **RIGHT:** Pacific crabapple, a native Northwest plant species. **BELOW LEFT:** A Columbian black-tailed deer, seen in a coastal meadow.

regularly for rest and food, otherwise they can't complete their journey. Compare this to the human experience of running out of gas miles away from a station, with no chance of assistance.

Wildlife corridors, which connect isolated animal populations, could help bridge these gaps. Passing through land that would otherwise be impassable due to human activity, these corridors integrate the role of private landowners.

While many plans for wildlife corridors call for thousands, if not millions, of contiguous acres of relatively unspoiled land, the concept of homegrown national parks presents a solution that community members can easily participate in. By creating a patchwork of smaller habitats that create stepping stones through human dominated areas, community members can arrange wildlife corridors and even year-round habitats for smaller, more human tolerant species. Neighborhoods may not play host to bighorn sheep or wolverines, but they can still offer a sanctuary for birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects and other invertebrates that are crucial to local food webs.

It doesn't take much. Even on just a small apartment balcony, a few containers with native plants can make a difference. Those with land have plenty of potential too. Even if your yard, garden or farm already has some native plants, consider increasing biodiversity levels by adding even more types and removing non-native competitors. With several

acres, consider trying to promote multiple habitat types, especially rare ones. For example, while there are plenty of forests here in the Columbia-Pacific region, native coastal meadows have largely been dug up, farmed or replaced by invasive plants.

This year, consider adding a goal to

become part of creating a homegrown national park, creating a better habitat for people, plants and local wildlife.

Rebecca Lexa is a naturalist, nature educator, tour guide and writer living on the Long Beach Peninsula. Find more about her work at rebeccalex.com.

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