

Pets and wildlife

Managing the needs of wild and domestic animals

BY REBECCA LEXA

The Columbia-Pacific region is known for its great diversity of wildlife, from mighty eagles and elegant elk to songbirds, salamanders and salmon. Sometimes, residents unfortunately create conflict when bringing domestic animals like cats and dogs into contact with wildlife. Fortunately, there are some ways to minimize this impact while still sharing the outdoors with pets.

Dogs

It's a familiar sight, an off leash dog charging at full speed down the beach toward a flock of shorebirds or gulls. While this may seem joyful to us, it's terrifying for the birds. They don't know that the dog supposedly "wouldn't hurt a fly," all they know is that a large, predatory animal is running toward them and they need to get away. Now, imagine what it feels like to have to sprint hundreds of yards. That's about what the encounter is like from the point of view of said birds, who fly away as fast as they can before dealing with fear for hours afterward.

After an overzealous workout, humans can just go to the fridge and pull out some extra food. Wildlife don't necessarily have



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A gull explores the edge of the water at Cape Disappointment State Park.

that option, they have to physically hunt, gather or scavenge all the calories they get, and it's not always guaranteed that they'll find a good meal.

Unfortunately, the food that people often toss to gulls and other birds isn't easily digested, and can actually lead to malnourishment over time. So when birds are repeatedly chased by dogs, children and cars, a loss of energy can actually depress their immune systems and make them less likely to fight off illnesses or recover from even minor injuries.

This principle extends across the region's wildlife. Any time a dog is allowed to chase animals, it leads to an unnecessary waste of calories for the target, to say nothing of injuries that can result from the chase. And if the dog makes the catch, it could injure or kill the hapless being even if the pup was just playing. Any animal that decides to fight



'Nigel,' the garden cat, with organic cabbage.

back can also inflict injuries on the dog, and a big enough creature, like an elk, deer or bear, could potentially kill it. Dangers abound for off leash dogs, even if they aren't on the hunt. Small dogs can be quickly snapped up by coyotes or eagles if they get too far away from humans.

Coyotes and dogs can also pass diseases to one another through their scat, which is one more great reason to clean up after your dog. So pack those bags and keep your dog on a leash to keep everyone safe. If they need some extra room to run, get a 30 foot or so lead that you can feed out as they run, then collect as they return.

Cats

Like small dogs, cats make a great snack for carnivorous wildlife. Sure, videos exist of cats chasing off black bears, but that's no guarantee that just any household feline will survive an encounter with

its larger bobcat cousin. Roaming cats are also at risk of dying from causes other than wildlife, like cars, no matter how fierce they may be.

Cats are also a menace to smaller wildlife. In the United States alone, cats kill 2.4 billion, yes, not million, birds each year, making them a larger threat than window strikes, pollution or poaching. That adds up in addition to the countless small mammals that cats slaughter. Most of these kills are never brought home, so a supposedly harmless cat may still be wreaking havoc on local wildlife. Cats also transmit diseases, most notably toxoplasmosis, which can sicken and kill many wild mammals, even if the cat shows no symptoms. Some bacteria within a cat's saliva are deadly to birds, even when a bird escapes without a bad bite. Bacteria can still be ingested later on, such as when the bird preens itself, and it can die soon thereafter.

While some argue that cats are natural predators, they're not the same as the region's native coyotes, foxes and bobcats. In fact, domestic cats are not native anywhere in the world, though they were domesticated from wild cats in the Near East. Domesticated cats are not a natural part of the wildlife food chain, and are an invasive species.

The safest place for cats is to stay indoors and away from wildlife. An enriching environment full of toys and hiding places will keep cats raised indoors busy. For cats who want to enjoy the outdoors, a patios and leash trained walks are great options. These can take a little more effort, especially with older cats, but are a lot of fun for both humans, cats and local wildlife.

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A beachgoer walks his dog toward the water at Sunset Beach.

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