

# Living with Wildlife

*Laguna Beach is uniquely situated at the edge of a 15,000 acre greenbelt of wilderness parks and natural open space. Our neighborhoods abut the open space along a wide boundary, and the many drainage courses create corridors where wildlife can travel freely.*

Living close to open space provides the opportunity to enjoy the many wild creatures living nearby. The howl of a coyote, or a chance encounter with a quietly browsing deer are experiences that help us connect with nature. For many people living on the urban/wildlands edge, these are the experiences they hoped for when deciding to settle there.

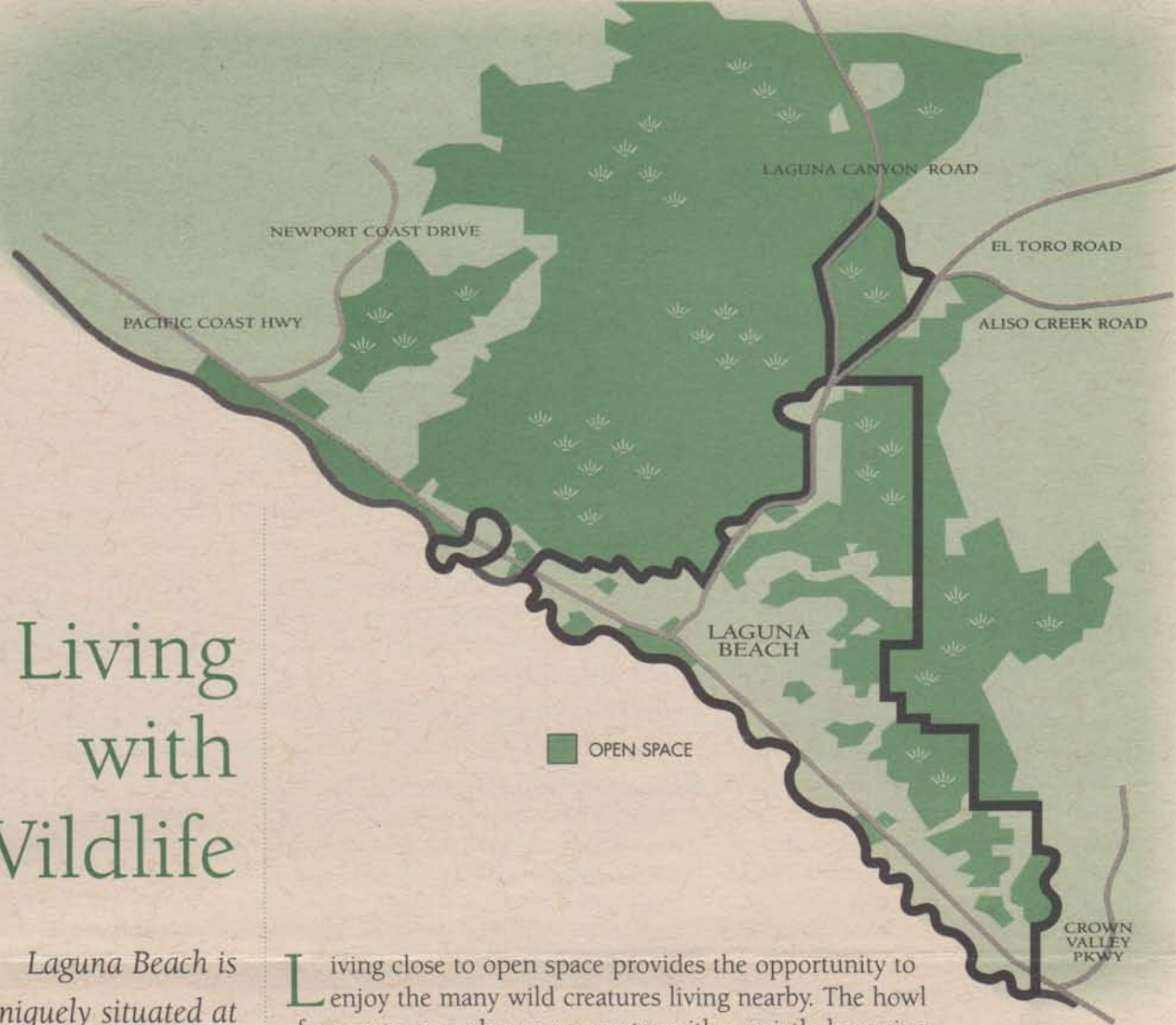
Our being on the edge of their habitat changes the environment for many wild animals. Homes and gardens represent new opportunities to find food and water. If we're not careful, we can create problem wildlife, dependent on the easy pickings of our garbage and pet food. We also need to be aware of the impact our pets could have on the wildlife.

In general, we want to discourage wild mammals such as skunks, coyotes, raccoons, opossums, rats, mice and possibly deer, from becoming too familiar and at ease in our homes and gardens, while keeping our pets from harming wildlife. This brochure is intended to help you coexist with your wild neighbors, and avoid unexpected and unpleasant encounters.

If you are also interested in creating favorable conditions for song-birds and butterflies through native plant gardening, please see the companion brochure, *Gardening is for the Birds*.

For more information, contact the sources listed at the back of this brochure, or write to:

THE LAGUNA GREENBELT, INC.  
P.O. Box 860, Laguna Beach, CA 92652





*Use receptacles with locking lids to discourage raccoons and other animals*



*Wildland ticks can carry serious animal and human diseases.*

## Controlling the Edge

All animals, including birds and insects, have four essential needs: water, food, shelter, and protected nest or den sites. Generally, you can encourage or discourage wildlife use of your garden by controlling these elements.

### COYOTES, RACOONS, OPOSSUMS, SKUNKS, RATS, MICE:

Discourage these creatures from coming into your yard where they could come into conflict with neighborhood pets or deposit infected ticks and fleas. The following simple practices can help discourage their visits to your garden or house.

- **Keep your garbage from becoming a food source.** Use receptacles with locking lids, or store garbage bins in the garage rather than outside.
- **Avoid feeding your pets outside,** and don't leave food out overnight.
- **Clean any remaining uneaten food and sauce** off your barbecue immediately after use. Skunks are very fond of chicken in BBQ sauce and will knock over a small grill even when it is still hot.
- **Prevent wildlife from living in and around the house.** Screen all openings into the crawl space under the floors and keep the garage door closed, especially at night.
- **Protect all pets** within a fenced back yard.
- **Vaccinate dogs and cats** regularly against rabies.
- **Keep all pets, including cats and small dogs, inside at night.**
- **Enclose bird or rabbit pens on all sides,** including roofs or secure chicken wire tops. Bury wire walls of large enclosures one foot in the ground to prevent raccoons and other animals from tunneling underneath. Check the perimeter frequently.
- **Avoid creating brushpiles or rockpiles** anywhere near the house.
- **Accept that raccoons and herons will eat the fish** in your ornamental fish pond.
- **Finally, if other methods fail,** there are private firms which will live-trap and remove a nuisance animal.

## Protecting Your Pets

Our pets are urban dwellers, biologically and behaviorally unprepared for the dangers of the wildlands, although people may mistakenly feel that their domestic pets "belong" in the wilderness, or "can take care of themselves" out there. **For their overall safety, protect your pets in a fenced yard.**

### FOXTAILS

Dogs and cats roaming in open grasslands encounter **foxtails**, the seed heads of certain grasses. These can work their way into any opening in the pet's body and even through the skin. In eyes they can cause blindness; elsewhere they can injure other organs. Often they can only be removed by a veterinarian.

### TICKS AND FLEAS

Ticks and fleas in wildlands can carry serious animal and human diseases such as Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever (ticks), or rabies and plague (fleas). These diseases are endemic in many wild animal populations and are transmitted through the bite of an infected tick or flea. Even uninfected ticks can cause blood poisoning.

### SNAKE BITES

Dogs romping through underbrush are likely to encounter rattlesnakes, a more serious problem for them than for humans. Local veterinarians treat many dogs for snake bites, and these dogs are the lucky ones, accompanied by a human who could rush them to medical aid. An unlucky dog may receive a bite on the neck, which is usually fatal, or be alone when bitten.

### ANIMAL CONFRONTATIONS

Encounters between pets and larger wildlife, such as raccoons, opossums or bobcats, can result in claw and bite wounds requiring medical attention. Wild animals do not respond in a friendly manner to an inquisitive pet, as anyone who has tried to clean skunk scent from fur can attest (try Skunk Off, or cider vinegar). Finally, dogs and cats allowed to roam may fall prey to wild animals such as coyotes and mountain lions searching for food. Even large dogs are not safe from coyote packs.

Only rattlesnakes have a large, roughly triangular-shaped head that is distinctly wider than the neck of the snake.



Domestic pets chase rabbits for sport, but the game can be lethal for the rabbit.



## Other Wildlife Encounters

### DEER

Deer visit gardens for water and succulent plant food when natural sources are scarce. In areas regularly visited by deer, any small tender plant will have to be protected, and it may not be possible to grow some kinds of plants, including vegetables, without elaborate fencing.

### LIZARDS

A variety of small lizards inhabits coastal sage scrub. These energetic creatures depend on the sun for warmth and may disappear during the winter. Rockpiles provide warm surfaces for basking, safety from predators, and insects for food. Cats and dogs may kill garden lizards; others leave their tails behind, still thrashing, while the rest of the lizard escapes.

### SNAKES

The only dangerous snakes locally are rattlesnakes, but many people fear all snakes. If you live on the edge of a wild area, someday you will find a snake in the garden. After the initial surprise, back off, take time to observe, and try to determine if it is a rattlesnake. *Rattlers, even small ones, have a large, roughly triangular-shaped head that is distinctly wider than the neck of the snake. No other snake has this characteristic. In addition, rattlesnakes have one or more rattles on the end of their tail. Very young ones have a button instead. All other snakes' tails end in pointed tips.*

- **If you have determined that the snake is a rattlesnake,** keep pets and people away and call the local animal control officer or police to remove it.

The largest snake locally is the harmless and beneficial gopher snake. This yellow and black snake preys on a variety of mice, rats and gophers. If handled improperly, this snake (and most others) can bite, but it cannot inject venom. Other harmless local snakes include the all-brown whip snake, the white and black-striped king snake, the pencil-thin garter snakes, and the very common western ring neck snake, named for the bright orange ring behind the head.

- **Do not try to pick up an intruding snake.** Shoo it towards an open door, or if in the garden, let it find its own way out. Keep inquisitive pets away.

### INSECTS AND SPIDERS

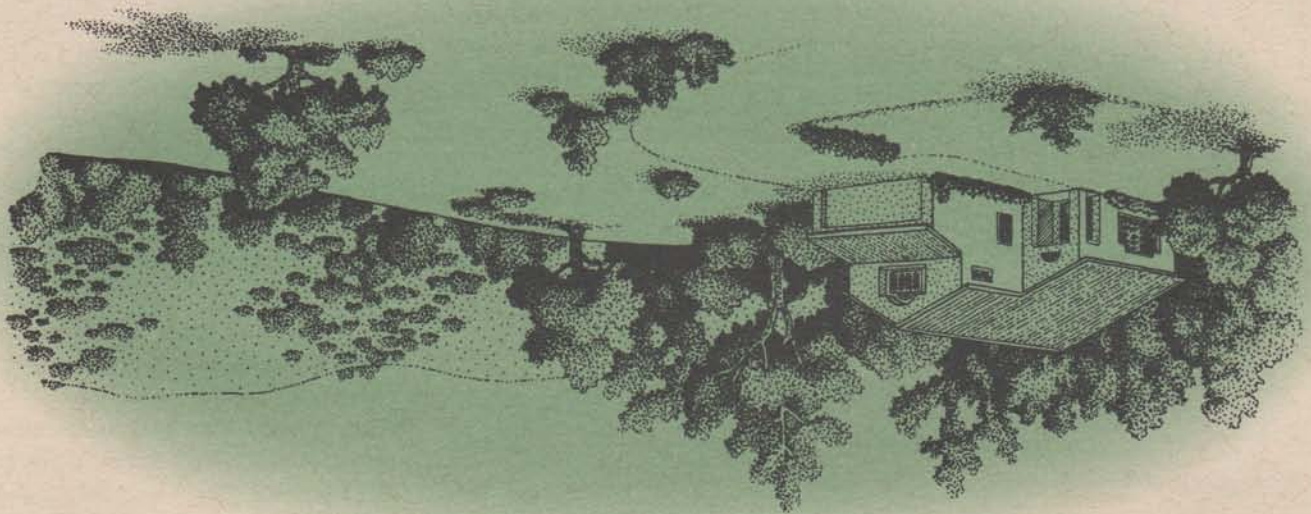
The most abundant animals in coastal sage scrub are insects, including beetles, moths and butterflies; and spiders. In the fall, wilderness edge gardens may be visited by scary looking but harmless tarantulas searching for winter burrows. Large black wasps with bright orange wings, known as tarantula hawks, blow in from the desert on Santa Ana winds. These predatory wasps paralyze tarantulas with venom, and stuff them into burrows as food for young wasps.

## Protecting Your Wildland Neighbors

- **Do not allow your pets to roam in the wildlands.** Well-fed domestic cats and dogs running free in wild areas can wreak havoc on wild bird populations and stress other wildlife. Hungry wild animals can only afford to expend a limited amount of energy to hunt, balancing the expected food return from the prey animal against the time and energy expended to hunt. Any predator will abandon a chase that goes on too long or becomes too difficult. Long-term survival of prey and predator depends on the balance created by this precise energy equation. Domestic pets, on the other hand, do not depend on the hunt for their calories. For them it is sport, and a dog with food and water available at home can afford to exhaust itself chasing rabbits all afternoon. For the rabbits, subject to overheating and faced with scarce water supplies, the game could be lethal.

House cats are by far the most effective predators on wild birds, and may wipe out local bird populations in natural areas that are surrounded by development. Research in England on rural village cats indicates that each year they destroy between  $\frac{1}{3}$  and  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the village house sparrows.

- **Never release unwanted cats, dogs, fish, frogs, birds, etc. into a park or natural area.** Abandoned pets are unable to live successfully on their own in the wildlands and starve to death or are eaten. The few exotic species that are able to survive successfully may reproduce explosively due to a lack of natural predators, crowding out desirable species. Starlings and pigeons are exotic birds that have become widespread pests.



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### Wilderness Cycles

The population size of wild animals fluctuates in response to vegetation and climate cycles, as well as the season of the year. Animal sightings and problems may wax and wane over the years. During drought years, the overall numbers of local wildlife decline, but more animals than usual may seek water and food in gardens. Cold or wet winters may encourage mice and rats to look for dry quarters around your house.

In late spring, the young of many species leave the nest or den and look for new territories. As with teenage humans, young animals or birds make a lot of noise, take chances, and sometimes blunder into unusual places. If that includes your back yard, don't encourage the animal with food or water or attempt to touch it. The animal may abandon its usual food sources and start foraging through other back yards. Also, encouraging ground birds such as quail out of the wildlands may actually be luring them into great danger from neighborhood cats and dogs.

Remember, wild animals are naturally shy and fearful of human contact. In the long run, it's better for them, and for you, if they stay that way.

### For Assistance or More Information

LAGUNA BEACH ANIMAL CONTROL.....	497-3552
PACIFIC WILDLIFE PROJECT (sick or injured wildlife).....	831-1178
HUMMINGBIRD HAVEN (for all young birds).....	635-3368
OPOSSUM SOCIETY.....	770-4093, 586-3529
PARK RANGERS AT: ALISO WOOD REGIONAL PARK.....	831-2791
LAGUNA COAST WILDERNESS PARK.....	854-7108
CRYSTAL COVE STATE PARK.....	494-3539

LAGUNA GREENBELT VIDEOS AND PUBLICATIONS in the Local History section of the Laguna Beach Public Library.

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FUNDING PROVIDED BY THE

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