

Urban Wildlife

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"What kind of bird is that?" my husband, Jerry, asked, looking out into our back yard. "And what do you think it's doing?" At first glance I couldn't answer either question. I'd never seen anything like it in our back yard before. The bird was apparently a predator, though it didn't look like a hawk. As to what it was doing, neither of us could guess right away.

After a few minutes, Jerry and I came to the joint conclusion that the bird, although not that big, had killed a smaller bird and was stripping its feathers. The larger bird was taking enough time over the job that I lost interest and left the scene of the crime. When I looked out again, the predator had flown off with its prey.

We live on a short street just west of Mississippi Avenue in Little Rock, which is not exactly wilderness. However, our lot backs up to a church with some property which has gotten pretty overgrown. And there's a city easement between our property and the church's, which is very overgrown. Add to that the demolition or removal of most of a city block of houses by the nearby Anthony School (for what purpose no one seems to know), and we have something of an urban wildlife habitat. When vacant lots go unmowed and the shrubs go untrimmed for a year or more in this climate zone, Mother Nature just naturally reasserts herself.

Raccoons and possums, even an alleged badger, have been showing up in these parts for years. Not long after we moved here a neighbor reported seeing the badger in our backyard.

Jerry said he didn't think we had badgers around here.

"Well, he looked like he was just passing through," the neighbor said.

One morning several years later the sound of barking caused me to look blearily out the bathroom window. At first I thought the large animal straddling the fence between our yard and the neighbor's might be a black panther escaped from the zoo. Then I put on my glasses and realized it was the neighbor's black Lab barking at a raccoon in our oak tree. The Lab had apparently treed the coon, tried to go after it, and got stuck on top of the fence. I called her mama, described the situation, and suggested she get the dog in the house and keep her there long enough to let the coon escape. Next time I looked out the window dog and coon were both gone.

In recent years a tribe of stray cats has taken residence in our neighborhood. There were two who looked so much alike we called them Pete and Repeat. When one disappeared we decided that one was Pete and the remaining one was Repeat. Repeat hung around long enough for us to put cat food out for him on a regular basis. Then he disappeared too.

After we lost Repeat another cat took up with us. We decided not to name this one, instead calling him by the time-honored "Kitty." (Sometimes we call him "Mr. Kitty.") Kitty is a little skittish, which may be how he's survived. Also, we realized recently, he's learned to supplement his diet. One Sunday when I came home from church, Jerry reported that Kitty had gotten a squirrel.

I was actually proud to hear about Kitty's enterprise, possibly because I didn't see the squirrel conquest myself. I'd been feeding the birds and feeding the kitty one morning when it occurred to me I could save a step by just encouraging the kitty to go after the

birds. This is the kind of "law of the jungle" mentality that gets hold of you when you've become familiar with urban wildlife.

On a recent Sunday morning I was out in the kitchen getting breakfast when Jerry said excitedly, "Look, there's that bird again." He was looking out a window at the front of the house and sure enough, there was the predator, in the middle – IN THE MIDDLE – of our street, half a block off Mississippi Avenue. Once again it had brought down a smaller bird, but this time we were in for the kill. We watched the hapless prey flop its last; after that the killer bird did a sort of victory dance, two-stepping exuberantly around its trophy. Then, possibly perceiving the middle of the street not to be safe for the final processing operation, it flew off with its quarry.

"You know what?" Jerry said, "I'm glad we live in an environment that can support this kind of thing."

And you know what? So am I.