

BEYOND SPEED BUMPS:

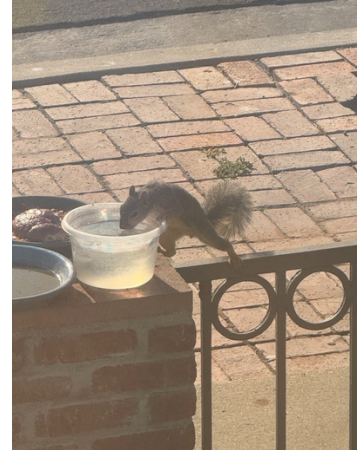
HOW OUR BACKYARDS CAN SAVE URBAN WILDLIFE

A few years ago, a beloved neighborhood cat was tragically struck by a speeding car on our street. My father, determined to make our community safer, successfully petitioned the city to install speed bumps. It was a victory for neighborhood safety—or so we thought. A year later, one of the local neighborhood squirrels that I regularly feed and watch from my porch was killed on that exact same stretch of road. It was a heartbreaking realization: our traditional traffic calming measures and neighborhood designs are built solely for human visibility, not for the smaller wildlife desperately trying to survive alongside us.

Batman, a beloved neighborhood cat whose tragic passing inspired local traffic calming measures
(Photograph by X. de la Torre, 2026).



A neighborhood squirrel safely drinking from a provided water bowl during the summer heat
(Photograph by X. de la Torre, 2026).



This local neighborhood tragedy highlights a massive global issue: urbanization and habitat destruction. As cities and suburbs sprawl outward, we slice ancient, sprawling ecosystems into tiny, disconnected islands. We put up fences, pour concrete, and lay down asphalt highways. This is not just an inconvenience for animals; it is an existential threat. On a global scale, this habitat fragmentation pushes countless species toward extinction by limiting their access to food and genetically diverse mates. The communities most directly affected are edge-communities—neighborhoods like ours that bleed into wild spaces—and, of course, the displaced wildlife themselves.

When we talk about this crisis on a planetary scale, scientists refer to the planetary boundary of "Biosphere Integrity," which is essentially a measurement of the health of global biodiversity. You can think of our local ecosystem like a giant, complex game of Jenga. Every native plant, insect, bird, and mammal is an individual block. When human development removes a block—by cutting down a native tree or paving over a foraging ground—the tower stays standing for a while. But eventually, if we pull out too many blocks, the entire tower collapses, resulting in a total ecosystem failure.

Human activities contribute directly to this instability. Sprawling suburban developments and traditional landscaping choices, such as planting massive non-native lawns, strip away the natural food and shelter animals need to survive. Furthermore, this urban sprawl severely disrupts critical biogeochemical cycles, most notably the Carbon Cycle. Healthy, undisturbed soil and native trees act as the earth's natural "sponges," soaking up carbon dioxide from the atmosphere through photosynthesis. When we clear these forests and pave over the soil with concrete, we remove the sponges entirely. As a result, more heat-trapping carbon dioxide remains in our air, worsening local temperatures and accelerating global climate change.



It is easy to point fingers at neighborhood development, but it is also crucial to acknowledge that wanting a controlled, safe environment is a deeply valid human instinct. As a homeowner, worrying about the physical safety of your children and pets when coyotes or mountain lions are spotted nearby is completely understandable. We all want to protect our property values and keep our families safe. But viewing nature as an "invader" that needs to be fenced out is a misconception. We can absolutely maintain safe, beautiful neighborhoods while still providing safe passage for the wildlife that belongs here.

HOW DO WE ACTUALLY FIX THIS?

We don't have to look far for inspiration. The Urban Wildlife Information Network (UWIN), coordinated by the Lincoln Park Zoo, is a brilliant example of collaborative problem-solving. UWIN is an international alliance of researchers who use camera traps to gather massive amounts of data on how animals move through urban spaces. By understanding these complex migration patterns, city planners and architects can design better wildlife corridors that keep animals safely off busy roads, minimizing human-wildlife conflict.

But you don't need a PhD or a city planning degree to make a difference. Look at the Green Seattle Partnership (GSP) as an example of localized success. This is a community-driven initiative where everyday volunteers, students, and local residents work together to restore 2,500 acres of Seattle's forested parklands. They spend their weekends physically removing aggressive invasive species and planting native trees. GSP proves that ordinary people can make a massive, tangible difference in restoring urban forests, improving neighborhood air quality, and rebuilding habitat connectivity right in their own backyards.

A Cooper's hawk observing the neighborhood, demonstrating that apex predators live among our urban sprawl (Photograph by X. de la Torre, 2026).



A local crow finding a safe haven in our neighborhood (Photograph by X. de la Torre, 2026).



A local heron hunting a gopher in an urban schoolyard, highlighting the reality of the urban-wildlife interface (Photograph by X. de la Torre, 2026).

The solution to habitat destruction does not just rest in the hands of government agencies—it starts in our own front yards. You do not need to turn your property into a wild jungle to help. My challenge to you this week is to implement just one safe, wildlife-friendly practice. Replace a small patch of your non-native lawn with a native shrub to provide shelter for local birds and insects. Put out a clean birdbath to provide fresh water during the hot summer months. And, crucially, ensure your household trash is securely locked away to prevent unwanted, dangerous scavenging.

We cannot magically un-pave the roads we have built, but by making small, intentional, and compassionate choices, we can ensure our neighborhoods are safe havens for every resident—two-legged, four-legged, and winged alike.

