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Protecting Local Wildlife

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Florida contains a rich variety of habitats that vary from coastal and freshwater wetlands, pinelands, scrub, and forests due to the range of climates from the panhandle to the southern end of the state. In these habitats are many species of wildlife that call them home. We are extremely fortunate to live among a diverse wildlife population, but development pressure is causing wildlife to move into urban areas in order to meet their basic needs of water, food, and shelter. This results in an increase in encounters between people and wildlife. By practicing caution when these wildlife encounters occur, both can be safe.

Alligators

Due to their abundance in Florida, this is the first thing that comes to mind for many people when they think of the state (especially if you are a UF fan). Alligators are listed by the federal government as an endangered species and live in large shallow lakes, marshes, ponds, swamps, rivers, creeks, and canals, which are throughout the state. There is generally a peaceful coexistence between gators and people, but problems occur when people feed them and they begin to associate humans with food. So, never feed alligators anything. This action is illegal and changes the behavior of the animal by making them more aggressive towards people. Other ways to stay safe are to remain alert in areas where alligators may be present and do not swim or wade in waters where alligators have been spotted especially at dusk and night, which is when the animals naturally feed. Keep small children and pets away from the water edge because they may appear to look like prey to a hungry alligator.

It also is illegal to harass or harvest an alligator without a permit. If an alligator takes up residence in your neighborhood and becomes a nuisance, contact your local or regional Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) office or call **1-800-FWC-GATOR**.

Raccoons

Raccoons are commonly seen in urban areas because they are highly adaptable and thrive in a variety of habitats. Generally, raccoons are harmless, but they are a major carrier of rabies so caution needs to be practiced around these animals. Since raccoons are not picky about what they eat, they can become a nuisance by raiding garbage cans and pet food dishes. To avoid attracting these animals to your home, purchase a raccoon proof garbage can or place a weight on the top so they cannot open it and place the cans either in the garage or a locked enclosure. If you feed your pet outside, remove any uneaten food before dusk. Finally, do not voluntarily give raccoons food, which is illegal.

Snakes

I don't like snakes, but I realize they are not bad guys because they help keep a balance in the environment by being both prey and predator to other wildlife. Snakes avoid people when possible and more people are bitten by dogs than snakes each year. However, if you are like me and want to avoid them, here are some recommendations. Don't give snakes a home by eliminating items lying close to the ground like firewood stacks, debris, and boards. If you encounter a snake, leave it alone. Although 38 of the 44 species found in Florida are non-venomous, snakes will become aggressive when they feel threatened. Even though a bite from a non-venomous snake isn't lethal, it will hurt.

Armadillos

Armadillos are usually harmless towards humans, but they can wreak havoc on lawns. Since a majority of an armadillo's diet is made up of soil dwelling insects and their larvae, they can damage lawns when rooting for food. It is difficult to reduce this food source as a way of treating the problem since the use of insecticides has been proven ineffective. A physical barrier, such as a fence, is one control method. By slanting a fence at a 40° angle and burying a portion, it may prevent armadillos from entering your lawn. Another control method is live trapping, which is difficult. Use of a live trap box baited with earthworms in a ball of soil has had limited success. Any trapped animals should be released several miles away from your home.

Wildlife plays an important role in the environment and should be enjoyed, but safety around them is the key to keeping everyone happy. For more information about wildlife safety, contact your local county extension service.