

Living With Wildlife in Southwest Florida

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Just like us, wildlife are doing their best to make a living and raise their young. Developing an appreciation and understanding of your wild neighbors can help you learn to accept them and live in harmony with them without resorting to extreme measures.

Although relocation is sometimes necessary, [trapping and relocating wildlife](#) is a last resort and only warranted if all other measures have failed and an animal becomes a threat. Removing one animal may only serve to open up territory for others to move in. Rather than getting your feathers ruffled, make simple accommodations to avoid wildlife conflicts then relax and enjoy the wonders of wildlife in your own backyard.

Follow these simple tips to enjoy the wildlife around us safely:

- **Do not feed wildlife!** Feeding wildlife accustoms them to humans and is a certain death sentence for bears, alligators and other species.
- Making simple accommodations will often solve the problem of marauding raccoons and other critters. Remove the free meal attractant by feeding pets indoors, installing baffles on bird feeder poles and fastening trash cans lids with rubber straps.
- Bring pets inside at night to keep them safe from hungry predators.
- Cover possible entryways with hardware cloth to exclude squirrels, bats and other animals scouting out your home for a safe place to raise their young.

Alligators

There's a gator in my yard! What should I do??!!

Alligators have inhabited Florida's marshes, swamps, rivers and lakes for many centuries, and are found in all 67 counties. In recent years, Florida has experienced tremendous human population growth. Many residents seek waterfront homes, and increasingly participate in water-related activities, thus increasing the chances for encounters with alligators.

Gators are part of the Riverwind Cove environment, and seeing them is no cause for alarm. For more information about co-existing with alligators, see the following publication:

Alligator brochure-PDF

Sandhill Cranes

Sandhill cranes are cherished members of the Florida ecosystem. They stand almost 4 feet tall and their bugling or rattling calls are haunting and beautiful. Sandhill cranes occur in pastures, open prairies and freshwater wetlands in peninsular Florida from the Everglades to the Okefenokee Swamp.

People inadvertently put the birds in harm's way when they attract them to their yards with feed. Some "feeding" is accidental such as when bird seed is spilled from feeders by other animals onto the ground below making a nice feeding station for cranes. However, some people deliberately feed Sandhill cranes. **In 2002, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission made it illegal to feed Sandhill cranes (Florida Fish and Wildlife Code 68A-4.00(3)).**

Why is feeding cranes prohibited?

Cranes fed by humans can become aggressive toward people. Cranes fed by humans have been known to damage window screens and do other property damage. This behavior is probably a response of the birds to seeing their reflection, bringing out a territorial defense behavior (scratching at windows or shiny automobiles). Cranes also are more likely to tangle in human garbage in areas populated by people. Cranes attracted to people's yards for feed are put at risk as they walk across roads. Attracting cranes to urban areas increases the threat of predation (especially to young cranes) by dogs or cats. Further, the cranes' diets, which normally are quite diverse, are disrupted when they eat one food item (such as corn), consistently. Heavy pesticide use in urban lawns also is of concern.

Florida Sandhill cranes have an abundance of natural foods (insects and small animals) and do not need handouts from humans.

Four things you can do to better coexist in "Crane Country"

- Never feed cranes and encourage your neighbors not to feed cranes.
- Cover or move automobiles so that cranes cannot see their reflections in the shiny surfaces. Windows or glass doors that the cranes attack can be temporarily covered with material so that the birds do not see their reflections.
- A string mounted on stakes about 2.5 feet off the ground will provide an exclusion "fence" around parts of homes (window or pool screens) that are being damaged by cranes.
- Accept some digging for food. Cranes sometimes damage lawns and gardens as they dig for food such as mole crickets and beetle grubs. The birds, in this case, provide natural "biological control" of these common pests of turf.

Coyotes

Coyote brochure-PDF

Coyotes are found throughout Florida and have been documented in all 67 counties. They are typically shy and elusive but encounters between people and coyotes in Florida are occurring more often. Coyotes help maintain balanced ecosystems by controlling the populations of rodents and small predators, such as foxes, opossums and raccoons. They are native to North America, have been in Florida for many years, and will continue to make their homes around the state. Following are suggestions for coexisting with coyotes:

What should I do if I see a coyote?

Coyotes are not large animals and rarely pose a threat to people, especially adults. They can be curious but are also timid and generally run away if challenged. If a coyote approaches too closely, there are methods you can use to deter it and frighten it away.

- Waving your arms in the air and yelling will usually get a coyote to retreat. You may need to move towards the coyote and increase hazing if the animal does not immediately run away.
- Do not run from a coyote, as this may cause the animal to chase.
- Teach children to recognize coyotes. If children are approached by a coyote, have them move slowly inside and yell – teach them not to run, which could cause a coyote to chase.

How can I protect my pets from coyotes?

Coyotes can and do prey on domestic cats and small dogs. Most coyote attacks on pets occur either at night or in the early evening or morning hours (dusk and dawn). To protect your pets, do not allow them to roam freely.

- Keep cats indoors. Free-roaming cats are at a high risk of being preyed on by coyotes.
- Walk small dogs on a short leash, especially at night, dusk or dawn. Be extra careful if you are going to walk your pet in wooded areas or areas that have heavy foliage, where coyotes could hide.
- If pets are kept in a fenced yard, be sure the fence is high enough (about 6 feet) to prevent coyotes from jumping over it and check the bottom of the fence regularly to ensure there are no holes where coyotes can get underneath.
- Remove other attractants from around your home, such as pet food and unsecured garbage left outside.

How can I prevent problems with coyotes?

- Never feed coyotes either intentionally or unintentionally. Do not place food outside that will attract wild animals. Clean up pet food, fallen fruit and seed around bird feeders – coyotes will be drawn to and eat all of these potential food sources, since they are opportunistic feeders. Coyotes that associate places where people live as an easy place to find food will gradually lose their natural fear of humans.
- Secure garbage cans and compost in animal-proof containers.
- Be aware of unusual coyote behavior. Unusual behavior could include a coyote that has lost its fear of humans and is approaching people, chasing joggers and bikers, or attacking leashed pets. Unusual coyote behavior can be reported to FWC's Wildlife Alert number at 888-404-FWCC (3922).
- Close off crawl spaces under porches and sheds to prevent coyotes and other animals from resting or raising their young in areas around your home.
- Educate your neighbors and ask them to follow these same steps.

Snakes

Florida has an abundance of wildlife, including a wide variety of reptiles. Snakes, and their cousins the alligators, crocodiles, turtles and lizards, play an interesting and vital role in Florida's complex ecology.

Many people have an uncontrollable fear of snakes. Perhaps because man is an animal who stands upright, he has developed a deep-rooted aversion to all crawling creatures. And, too, snakes long have been used in folklore to symbolize falseness and evil.

Whatever the reason for disfavor, snakes nonetheless occupy a valuable place in the fauna of the region. On the plus side, for example, snakes help keep in check rodents that threaten crops and, not uncommonly, carry diseases that afflict man. Depending on your point of view, Florida is either blessed or cursed with a rich diversity of snakes. Our 44 species of snakes are found in every conceivable habitat, from coastal mangroves and saltmarshes to freshwater wetlands and dry uplands, and many species thrive in residential areas. However, there are just a few species that are commonly seen in developed areas, although any snake may occasionally be found in urban settings.

Only six of Florida's 44 snake species are venomous: the eastern coral snake, the southern copperhead, the cottonmouth, the eastern diamondback rattlesnake, the timber rattlesnake, and the dusky pygmy rattlesnake. Most Florida snakes are harmless and beneficial and remove extra rodent populations. Even the venomous species are not particularly dangerous unless stepped on or otherwise provoked.

What to do when you see a snake

What should you do when you come upon a snake? Just stand back & observe it. Snakes don't purposefully position themselves to frighten people. They'd much rather avoid encounters and usually will flee.

There is no good reason to kill a snake except in the unlikely situation of a venomous snake posing immediate danger to people or pets. Snakes usually bite people only if they are molested; it's their only means of self-defense. Even a venomous snake in the woods or crossing the road poses no threat and should be left alone. Some snakes, such as the Eastern indigo snake, are designated as endangered or threatened species and are protected.

The frequent sighting of snakes near dwellings or out-buildings may indicate the presence of rodents. Removal of brush, lumber or other debris accumulations will discourage both rodents and snakes.

For further reading:

A brochure with photos and information about the six venomous snakes in Florida, titled "[*Florida's Venomous Snakes*](#)," as well as a brochure titled "[*Florida's Non-venomous Snakes*](#)" are available from regional offices of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.