

Misunderstood Species of Georgia – October

In Coastal Georgia we are so fortunate to be surrounded by such unique natural environments and so many fascinating wildlife species. Unfortunately, a lot of these species get a bad rap – usually because of poor human behavior or simple lack of understanding. As we continue to develop more and more of the remaining natural areas in our county, there will inevitably be more human/wildlife interaction as we continue to impede on wildlife habitat. I always encourage clients to try to coexist, and to remember that every species has an important role to play.

One of our most fascinating misunderstood species is the Virginia Opossum. Opossums are North America's only native marsupial, and have a prehensile tail and an opposable thumb. They are important seed dispersers, and eat rats, insects, snakes (including venomous snakes), carrion, fruit and nuts. Opossums are immune to pit viper venom and are rabies resistant. Possibly the best thing (to humans) about opossums is that they are very efficient groomers and can eat up to 5,000 ticks per year. In addition, they can't contract or carry Lyme disease. In fact, some scientists are calling them the best tool in the fight against Lyme disease. This is especially important as our climate warms and we are seeing disease ranges change and expand.

Vultures don't usually get a lot of love from humans, but we'd sure be in a mess without them. We have two species of vulture, the black vulture and the turkey vulture, and they serve as nature's cleanup crew. Through their consumption of carrion (dead things) they prevent the spread of disease and pathogens. Vultures have a featherless head for hygiene, and a strong tolerance to bacterial toxins that would kill most other animals including humans.

Snakes aren't everyone's favorite wild animal to encounter, but they're of huge importance to our health and safety as well as being economically beneficial. Snakes eat a variety of destructive and disease carrying pests including mice, rats and garden insects. Some snakes are also used to assess pollutants. Of the 46 species of snakes in Georgia, only six are venomous (and they are some of our best rodent eaters). It is illegal to kill non-venomous snakes in Georgia, but I would encourage you to let the venomous snakes live as well. They're important for a number of reasons, but the thing that most folks find most interesting is that their venom is being researched and used in treatments for diseases like Alzheimer's, breast cancer, heart attacks and strokes.

Glass lizards are intriguing creatures that are often mistaken for snakes. Glass lizards are legless lizards that eat insects, spiders, small reptiles and young rodents. All four species of glass lizard that occur in Georgia occur in Camden County. Glass lizards have moveable eyelids, external ear openings and inflexible jaws. They earned their name by their unique ability to "shatter." They break their tails into several pieces as a strategy to escape predators.

Bats are some of my favorite animals. In Georgia we have 16 species of bats – all of which feed on flying insects. A single bat can eat hundreds of mosquitoes per hour. In addition to human pests, bats also eat agricultural pests providing significant economic benefit. In many parts of the world bats also provide critical pollination services – including the pollination of many plants that we use for medicine as well as tequila!

The cute and mischievous raccoon is not thought of with affection by most homeowners. Raccoons eat insects, rodents, snakes, frogs, lizards, and wasp larvae in addition to carrion. Their cleanup of carrion

helps prevent the spread of disease and their consumption of native plants makes them great seed dispersers of native plants. They are clever and curious, and humans could learn a thing or two from raccoons about team work. Raccoons are quick to work together to solve problems and get resources for the group. They are fascinatingly smart. I've always said that I've yet to meet a person that can't be outsmarted by a raccoon.

Georgia has four species of native squirrel – all of which seem to elicit either love or hate from our human residents for various reasons. The gray squirrel is the species we're all most familiar with, but there are also fox squirrels, red squirrels and Southern flying squirrels. Squirrels are nature's best foresters. They contribute to forest regrowth and seed dispersal as they fail to recover up to 74% of the acorns and seeds that they hide.

If you live near a pond in Camden County you have had, do have, or will have an alligator. Alligators avoid human contact when possible unless humans are feeding them (never feed an alligator). Alligators control animals that might overtax marshland habitat and offer predator protection to bird rookeries. Alligators are also "keystone species," meaning that they are a species that many other species depend on for survival. The wallows that alligators create provide a water source for other wildlife species during periods of drought.

Everyone is familiar with the defense strategy of the skunk, but fewer folks are aware of the positive roles that they serve. Skunks cleanup rotting fruit and assist in seed dispersal. They keep populations of grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and wasps in check, and will also eat mice and moles.

Crows are an animal that we see a lot this time of year. One crow family can eat tens of thousands of destructive insect pests. In addition, crows will scavenge carrion, and will actually lead a predator to prey in order to get the leftovers. Crows are multi-level problem solvers that both create and utilize tools. They are being trained in some countries to assist humans with tasks such as picking up litter. Crows also remember faces so be sure to be nice to them!

Armadillos aren't usually a homeowner favorite due to their free and unsolicited aeration services to peoples' lawns from time to time. However, even these funky naturalized critters are helpful. Armadillos eat termites, fire ants, wasps, grubs and small snakes. Research is also starting to show that their burrows are providing habitat to other species much the way that gopher tortoise burrows do. Their burrows have been utilized by rabbits, opossums, mink, cotton rats, skunks, burrowing owls and the Eastern indigo snake. A bit of interesting armadillo trivia: they can swim and walk underwater for short distances.

The last species that I'll cover today may be the most controversial. I know a lot of people who love to hate coyotes. Coyotes are the size of small medium sized dogs. They range from 25-45lbs, with an average size of 30lbs. Their lifespan is 7-10 years, and monogamous pairs usually mate for life. Coyotes don't live in packs, but in small family units that consist of a mother and father (who both raise the offspring) and their pups. Rabies is rare among coyotes and attacks on humans are practically unheard of. Coyotes avoid humans (unless you feed them – which you shouldn't). In fact, though coyotes are naturally active during the day, they have become nocturnal (active at night) near human populations in order to avoid interaction with humans. They are rarely a threat to adult deer and primarily eat small mammals, fruit, insects and carrion. They help to maintain a balanced and less diseased ecosystem by controlling rodent populations and cleaning up carrion. Coyotes are a naturalized species that is filling

the predator role that was left open by human eradication of our native predators (gray and red wolves) and land clearing. Predators are critical to the health of the ecosystem and other species. Without them to keep populations in check, resources become depleted by overpopulation and ecosystems collapse.

As you encounter wild animals in your landscape and beyond, I hope you'll look at them with an open mind and the realization that we all have a job to do. I also hope you'll remember the words of Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife ecology, "*The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: 'What good is it?'*"