

The recall of the wild city

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We've seen our owl twice. The first time was during a winter dusk: he drifted across our vista from the balcony of our apartment in Johannesburg. In the chilly half-light, the apparent lack of a head on this sizeable bird, and the intense silence of its passage, meant it could only have been an owl.

The second time we saw it, it was perched on the roof of the adjoining block of flats: a motionless dark sentinel against the deepening turquoise of the evening sky. My five-year-old son was enchanted. He has been looking out for our barn owl ever since.

Needless to say, the owl is not "ours" at all. It reigns over our neighbourhood, preying on the small creatures that teem in the gardens and parks. While it is no fan of homo sapiens, the owl is here nonetheless: it is here for the well-watered urban ecosystem that humans have triggered. This paradox – that so many wild creatures who should (and do) fear us have chosen to live among us – is more striking than ever in the year of the pandemic.

Across the world, the silence of the Great Lockdown of 2020 invited some thrilling wild guests into the edges of big cities – and sometimes deep into their centres. Caracals prowled through the mountainside suburbs of Cape Town. Jackals wandered the streets and parks of Tel Aviv. Buffaloes trundled down empty Delhi highways. In some ways, this reclamation of cities by animals was in fact just the revelation of their presence --- they were always there. They were simply more discreet and cautious when we were dominating the space. Also, many fast-growing cities have encroached into wild habitats in recent years. Sometimes, the animals are quite literally standing their ground.

In urban South Africa, we humans are dominating our streets again. But perhaps a new future of respectful cohabitation is starting to emerge. In Cape Town, the Urban Caracal project has worked hard to raise public awareness of the importance of the caracal to the priceless ecosystem of the Cape Peninsula. These stylish, pointy-eared cats are the area's only remaining larger predators – it was once prowled by Cape lions, jackals, leopards and brown hyenas. And since the urban perimeter surrounding the peninsula has been densifying and growing by the year, the caracals are spending time in the suburbs. Their futures depend on our respect.

In order to understand caracals better – they have been little studied until recently – Urban Caracal Project team have tagged and tracked some 29 cats, among them the now-famous Hermes, who starred in an unforgettable photograph this year, taken by In the picture, Hermes lopes deftly along a metre-wide water pipe that spans a gorge on the Pipe Track trail above Camps Bay. The sunlit mountain, beach and sea glittering behind him. The image is a visual poem about balance, in every sense of the world. It captures these predators' adaptive courage in the face of human dominance: their capacity to coolly treat man-made structures as natural structures.

The risk factor in the ever-evolving relationship between urban wildlife and humans is that familiarity can breed contempt. And that contempt can cut both ways.

Late on a hot August night in Brooklyn, New York, a few years ago, I cycled across Brooklyn's Prospect Park. As I emerged from the firefly-dotted park onto Ocean Avenue, a gang of raccoons were rummaging through a bin opposite a McDonalds restaurant. They were totally untroubled by my presence just a couple of metres from them, eyeballing me with palpable disdain as they slurped leftover ketchup. I fully expected one of them to go all Travis Bickle on me: "You talkin' to me?"

The countless foxes of London are less boldly assertive than the raccoons of New York, but are similarly crafty scavengers of discarded food. The foxes have been citizens of the Big Smoke since the 1930s – or to be more accurate, the city has

been expanding into their old rural habitat since then. In a sense, they are protected by their caution – unlike the chacma baboons of the southern Cape Peninsula, whose habituation to humans gave them the courage to brazenly raid homes and mug unsuspecting tourists of their food.

Intensifying conflict between baboons and people during the 1980s and 1990s saw rising levels of wholesale culling and illegal hunting. The crisis forced the city to change tack, hiring teams of monitors to watch troublesome troops of baboons and chase them back into their mountainside habitats. The success of that effort was limited, though. Solitary males and bolder troops kept on raiding despite the monitoring efforts, simply because the nutritional value of human food was impossible to resist.

It took some careful, data-driven problem-solving by scientists such as Justin O’Riain, founder of the Baboon Research Unit, and the biological anthropologist Shirley Strum, to develop a better strategy. In 2011, a new company, Human Wildlife Solutions (HWS) was contracted by the city to tag and track “problem” male baboons, compiling a detailed database of their movements. These aggressive baboons, if they kept on raiding, were euthanased. The tradeoff was simple: to sacrifice some animals in order preserve the viability and welfare of the whole population, and gradually to allow the population’s earlier fear of humans – and their earlier ignorance of human food – to re-emerge. Contraception interventions are also on the cards to reduce population growth.

Some animal welfare activists fiercely opposed this pragmatic, nuanced approach to the baboons of Cape Town. But it has become a widely acclaimed model for resolving animal-human conflict in cities, forging an increasing peace between *papio ursinus* and *homo sapiens* at the tip of Africa.

It’s a little harder to make nice with urban leopards – but in Mumbai, a similarly delicate balance has been struck between the interests of humans and those of the dozens of leopards who live in the city’s adjoining Sanjay Gandhi National Park, some of whom stray into the city itself. These predators survive and thrive by preying on the teeming stray dogs that inhabit both the park and the metropolis – it is illegal to kill strays in India, so the cats’ food supply is guaranteed. Rarely do they attack or kill people, and the authorities rely on the traditional Indian reverence for big cats as the basis for a seemingly miraculous ecological harmony.

Urban beasts are here to stay. And their sudden visibility during the dark silence of the pandemic was a rapture, not a rupture; a moment that could strengthen humanity’s complicated bond with other creatures. As a result, our children may come to enjoy a deeper understanding than we do of our future on this planet.