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Gathering to address wildlife, humans coexisting

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LUBBOCK, Texas – Wildlife officials have heard the scary stories across Texas with increasing frequency: Farmers get spooked by rampaging feral hogs. Alligators show up in ponds too close to home. Coyotes snatch cats and dogs from the back porch.

The interactions between wildlife and humans rapidly encroaching on their habitats have become so common that officials have enlisted the help of biologists and other experts for the state's first conference aimed at avoiding such clashes.

"Concerns like nuisance coyotes and overpopulated deer can become flashpoints for divided communities, but properly managed wildlife and green space are vital to our quality of life," said John Davis, a Texas Parks and Wildlife Department urban wildlife biologist.

Those attending the Dallas conference Tuesday will learn how to educate residents to be smarter around wildlife, such as not hand feeding coyotes. Cities' officials also will be encouraged to establish response plans should a wildlife issue arise.

The animal run-ins vary across Texas. In many parts of the state, farmers and ranchers struggle to deal with the estimated 2 million wild hogs. The nation's largest feral pig population has been causing millions of dollars of damage to crops with their razor-sharp tusks and digging snouts.

Hogs typically run away, but when they're cornered or feel threatened "they have come at people," said Billy Higginbotham, a wildlife and fishery

specialist with Texas Cooperative Extension.

Rob Denkhaus has found success by trapping and humanely killing the animals that in recent years were running amok at the Fort Worth Nature Center and Refuge, where he is the natural resource manager. Hundreds have been killed since 2003, and hog sightings are now a rare occurrence.

"If it had been left untreated, it was going to become a severe environmental problem as well as a safety problem to our visitors," Denkhaus said.

It's an approach that can work in other parts of the state, Davis said.

In South Texas, alligators have been spotted alongside highways, behind strip malls, and in the manmade lakes of gated housing developments. The animals are commonplace in eastern and northern portions of the state, but have only recently become a common sight in the Rio Grande Valley.

"The bottom line is their habitat is expanding," said Amos Cooper, a Texas Parks and Wildlife alligator expert. The boom has prompted state officials to allow spring hunting outside the traditionally gator-rich areas for the first time this year, beginning in April.

Deer have been a problem in the San Antonio area and other parts of the state. Last fall, a San Antonio judge upheld a deer-feeding ban in Hollywood Park after residents filed a lawsuit against the town. The judge deemed the deer were wildlife, not pets as plaintiffs' attorney contended.

Coyotes are among the most common nuisance animals across Texas. They were exceptionally aggressive in the Austin area years ago, with reports of dead cats on the rise, when local officials implemented a program to address the problem.

The city and Travis County put together a plan and got funding to track residents' calls about coyotes' aggressiveness. The funding pays for a Texas Parks and Wildlife biologist who handles the control portion of the plan, which includes trapping.

"We're not trying to control population or eradicate," said Dorinda Pulliam,

director of that city's animal services who will present information at Tuesday's gathering. "We recognize that the ecosystem is there and we all have to live within it."

Education is also part of the Austin plan. Residents learn to alter how they might be making their neighborhoods inviting to coyotes. The city meets with neighborhood associations, advising residents not to keep small pets outside, not to leave pet food outside and keep lids on trash bins.

Understanding the situation is key, said Jan Patterson who lives in a semi-rural area just north of Dallas and frequently sees beavers, coyotes, foxes and bobcats.

Even though a friend of hers lost a Yorkshire terrier when a coyote snatched it off its leash, Patterson thinks humans need to keep things in perspective.

"I figure the animal was here first," Patterson said. "It's our responsibility to live within boundaries that are manageable."

Associated Press Writer Lynn Brezosky in Harlingen contributed to this report.

For information on the conference, call the Texas Cooperative Extension at (214) 904-3056 or the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department urban wildlife office in Cedar Hill at (972) 293-3841.

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