

Where the Wild

In their tales of wild encounters, our readers
provided powerful reminders of a world worth protecting



▲ WEB EXTRA: View more photos
of this chipmunk and other
inhabitants of HSUS photographer
Kathy Milani's backyard paradise
at [humanesociety.org/magazine](https://www.humanesociety.org/magazine).

Things Are

Conversations among crickets and catbirds lured me onto my back porch to read the following stories—really *read* them—on the last morning of a fleeting summer. I felt lucky: Quiet time is rare for anyone in this era of relentless communication. And as it turned out, that was part of the point.

Hoping to find a theme among readers' tales of wild encounters, I realized quickly that during my previous, more distracted reviews of the collection, it had been staring me in the face all along.

Of the many responses to our call for submissions, no one described traveling to the forests of Costa Rica in search of scarlet macaws or embarking on an Alaskan cruise to come face-to-face with a tufted puffin. Readers were in awe of the sightings they'd made close to home: a mama raccoon disciplining her poky youngsters, a coyote crossing a well-worn trail into the woods, a roadrunner burrowing in a prickly pear cactus.

Inspired by their ability to commune with nature right outside their doors, I headed into my neglected garden and walked as far as I could before hitting a patch of wayward hummingbird sage blocking the path.

I stopped only because I had to. As I stood wondering why it had once seemed like such a good idea to let my yard go wild and feeling unexpectedly out of place in the overgrown space, a hummingbird arrived on the scene and began sipping from the red flowers. A few seconds later, another hummingbird flew toward a spent sunflower head, zipped by within inches of my face, and joined his kin in the sage patch. A dance or a fight ensued—I couldn't tell which—and they both vanished.

The message was clear: The best things in life are sometimes steps within our grasp, if we can only manage to stand still long enough to appreciate them.

Overwhelmed by what is commonly called "progress," we often spend too much of our time apart

from nature. We are a busy species with elaborate dens that both protect and isolate us. Yet we so hunger for natural connections that, even at The HSUS, where animals are the focus of everything we do, we are surprised by these moments that remind us of why we keep at it. In a conference room coveted for its windows, the sight of a squirrel darting cheekily in and out of bushes or a goldfinch feasting on coneflowers is enough to stop a meeting in its tracks. And as we head out at the end of the day, even the weariest of our clan are never too tired to savor the arrival of deer feeding at the edges of the parking lot in the waning sunlight.

It's these accidental discoveries, the ones that creep up on us when we least expect it, that renew our sense of wonder. When HSUS president and CEO Wayne Pacelle found a mother pigeon nesting in a plant pot on his city apartment balcony this summer, he was delighted to cede the space to the growing family. "Each night, if I was in town, I'd come through my door and, as the crow flies, make my way to see them," he wrote in his blog entry the day after the pigeons departed.

Like Pacelle, staff photographer Kathy Milani has spent so many days on the road that, until recently, her own backyard was unfamiliar terrain. In 15 years of documenting everything from the Canadian seal hunt to the abuses of factory farms, her work has helped spur some of the greatest reforms in modern animal protection. But a few months ago, it was time for a respite; Milani parked herself near the pond behind her house and tried to sit still for a while. As the chipmunks peeked at her through crevices in the stones, she couldn't help but reach for her camera. What she learned was what she'd already known all along—what we all know, fundamentally, but too often ignore: "You don't have to go far away to an exotic location," Milani says. "The beauty is right there in front of you."

A special thanks to our readers for not letting us forget it.

— Nancy Lawson



Right in the middle of our bustling, metropolitan city is beautiful Mount Royal. It has a park, four large cemeteries, and several wooded areas that are home to a wonderful assortment of wildlife. In early 2007 I was extremely lucky to come across a beautiful mother fox and six young kits. I spent as much time as possible observing the den and photographing the family. One May morning I walked along my usual path and came upon one of the young kits at the entrance of the den. He seemed completely relaxed, even though he knew I was there. I watched these playful, intelligent, and lovely creatures for several months. My life has been enriched by the relationship I have had with these amazing foxes.

— *Doris Potter, Montreal, Canada*

A pair of doves have nested on our porch for the past two years. We kind of felt like aunt and uncle watching mom and dad build the nest, protect the eggs, feed the young ones, and gently force and lure them airborne.

This past year was a bit unusual. As I was going out the door, one of the young doves decided it was time to venture from the nest. Instead of flying away from the nest, it flew inside our house. My wife and I scurried to find the dove, but it was nowhere in sight. Knowing it had to be in the house, we conducted a room-by-room search.

Alas, there it was, hiding in the corner of our library bookshelf. I got a paper towel and gently placed the dove back in the nest. It huddled there facing the back of the nest like a child in the corner doing a timeout.



In the meantime, its sibling had left the nest. Mom did come back to comfort the wayward dove. It eventually left the nest, only this time in the right direction. Months later, we still see four doves visiting our yard. — *Tom Griffith, Anaheim Hills, California*

After years of renting office space for my business, I built a guest house next to my home on three and a half acres of unfenced Arizona desert. I now have real windows to the desert's animals. They've always been here; I just moved in with them.

Javelinas place their snouts right up against the glass doors to my office and doze on the patio. While on a conference call a few months ago, I looked out to see a red-tailed hawk plummet to earth with a dove in its grasp and land right outside my window. She watched me through the glass for what felt like hours, as she shifted her grip on her prey before lifting off, effortlessly, to soar away with her meal.

I monitor families of quail and look up from my computer to watch bobcats padding silently past. In springtime, I have marveled at the baby javelinas, rabbits, and other new creatures. I've also watched a roadrunner burrow into the base of a prickly pear, then sprint past my window with a baby chipmunk in its beak and the chipmunk mother in swift, chattering pursuit.



If a coyote stops to gaze at me, I do not matter to her. There is a rhythm here that I was never aware of, and I don't flatter myself to believe I am part of—it has nothing to do with me when I look up from my work to see six jackrabbits bound directly towards me and then, just as quickly, splinter off in six different directions, all at the same time, as if on cue. It has nothing to do with me when I leave my office in early evening and almost lose my footing when an owl's wings come close enough to my head to move my hair. I now spend the day with my camera, birding book, and binoculars as close at hand as my telephone and filing cabinet. I am blessed and lucky.

— *Elaine Baugh Walsh, Tucson, Arizona*

When I lived in Cape Cod, in the forest behind my home was an elusive pack of coyotes. I'd never actually seen any of them but occasionally heard pack members howling and answering, always in the middle of a winter night. Their eerily beautiful voices, like a cross between human and wolf, completely unnerved my greyhound, Rosie, and nothing I did could calm her as she endlessly paced the length of our home, never stopping until the howling faded away.

Early one chilled foggy morning, Rosie and I were walking along an empty side road when an adult coyote emerged silently from the forest. The coyote trotted across the road and stopped about 30 feet directly ahead of us. He turned his head and looked at us. I held my breath, knowing how lucky I was to be seeing that beautiful wild animal. Rosie stood completely still at my side, so I have a hunch she knew that was no dog up ahead! After staring at us for a moment, the coyote resumed his silent trek into the forest behind our home. In my five years there, that was the only time I saw a coyote, but I can still feel the awe of that moment in the presence of a wild animal in whose home I was the intruder.

— **Patricia M. White**,
New York, New York



For many years now I have taken an annual trip up to the Lassen National Forest area in Northern California. There is a peaceful and mystical lake that I go to before sundown, where I watch and listen to the hundreds of bats that come out of the surrounding trees. I sit there in total silence and can feel the flutter of their energetic wings. They swoop and dive over the lake, catching insects. The lake is surrounded by a gorgeous border of majestic pines. One such evening, while observing this spectacle, I saw a huge owl dive in, grab a bat in midair, and take off across the lake. Wow! What a moment.

— **Karen Bert**, *Mill Valley, California*

We used to live near the shore on Long Island, and a raccoon family lived in the big oak tree between our house and the Sound. One evening, we saw the mama raccoon, followed by two babies, walking across our backyard. One of the youngsters kept stopping and looking around. Mama would stop and turn, and you could hear her scolding him. Then they would start forward again, but soon the baby would stop, and the whole episode was repeated. This happened three or four times as they crossed our backyard going to our neighbor's house, where they often foraged in the garbage can.

— **Mildred Katzell**, *Medford, New Jersey*

One beautiful spring afternoon, I went to my balcony to discover, at arm's length, a walnut-sized nest, detailing the most dazzling design and architecture imaginable. A hummingbird sat snugly tucked in the nest, keeping her egg incubated. I realized that I had stumbled upon one of the most beautiful and profound experiences I will have in this lifetime.

Over the next month, I sat with her, sang to her, and took in each new day with great anticipation of the new addition to "our family." On a cool May morning, around 6 a.m., I awoke to the familiar (and very loud) hum of wings at my screen. The hummingbird was looking right into my room, as she had never done before, as if beckoning me to come out onto the balcony. In my half-asleep state, I grabbed my camera and followed. To my breathtaking surprise, there she stood, perched on the edge of her nest, feeding her newly hatched chick.

For several weeks, I watched as she nurtured her baby, until one bittersweet afternoon, mother and baby fled the nest, seeking the sweet nectar of life that lay ahead. I feel deeply honored and blessed that Mother Nature revealed herself in a way that profoundly touched my heart.

— **Noelle Meade**, *Valencia, California*



Ducky is a Pekin Duck who was dumped by someone in High Park in the middle of Toronto. Though not meant to live in the wild, Ducky thrived for years. When I met Ducky in 2007, I fell in love with this beautiful and energetic animal who was full of life and personality. After befriending him, I resolved to take my

love of animals to the maximum by becoming vegan. I haven't looked back.

The last time I saw him was on Sept. 10, 2008. He lives on in my heart, in the hundreds of pictures that I took of him, and in my animal activism, which is devoted to Ducky, the little white duck who changed my life.

— **Bonnie Lynn Shulman**,
Toronto, Canada

