

Wildlife at wildwood

We are blessed with a wide variety of wildlife in or around Wildwood. We are located on a very high and fairly dry plateau that was referred to as South Park by the old timers. The area is sandwiched between two mountain ranges at an elevation of 9200 feet. The Continental Divide in the Pike National forest is on the west. Tarryall Reservoir and Tarryall Creek in the Lost Creek Wilderness Area and Pike National Forest borders us on the east. The South Platte River flows from west to east across the high valley plains about five miles south. Tarryall, Antero, Spinney and Eleven Mile Reservoirs are all within twenty miles. All of the reservoirs provide water storage; wildlife and wetlands habitat; excellent fishing, and recreational opportunities.

Historically this area was a volcanic caldera. The area was also at sea level once and covered with large redwood trees. This is well documented at the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument just 30 miles to the east at Florissant, Colorado. I've found petrified wood in the forest just east of us. Large dinosaurs roamed the area as evidenced by the archeological finds of national prominence in Canon City just 50 miles south.

This is excellent environment for large game animals. There are sizable elk herds to the west and east of us. The US Fish and Game estimates the herd count as 600 on the west and 800 on the east. I counted over sixty elk that crossed in front of my truck on Elkhorn Road just north of Wildwood a few years ago. One time Faye and I counted ninety-five elk just east in Pike National Forest and frequently see small groups of them both in the forest and in the valley. We also have mule deer around. We've seen them occasionally around our property and from our kitchen window. Some must have wintered next to our house this last winter judging by the droppings on the lawn. We've also had elk jump our fence and come onto our property.

Antelope abound in and around Wildwood. It is not unusual at all to count thirty in a herd when they "herd-up" in the fall. We've seen herds approaching a hundred on the plains to the south. They are curious animals and will stand for quite a while if you stop and don't try to approach them. The herd buck will usually, snort, stamp on the ground with its front hooves and shake its prong horns back and forth. They are truly prong horned and do not shed their horns like deer and elk shed their antlers. They are born to run. The young in spring can outrun a coyote when only a few days old. We observed a female chasing a coyote on Olympic Circle with a very small fawn right at her heels. We've had them enjoy racing our car at over 35 miles per hour running parallel to us just a hundred feet or so off the road. Then with no apparent reason, other than to win the race; they will put on a sudden burst of speed and sail across the road in front of you.

Herds of ranch raised buffalo are common throughout the valley. They are known as bison to some folks. They were called buffalo where we grew up in Idaho so they are still buffalo to us.

Buffalo were native to South Park and were sought after by the Cheyenne Indians. The salt licks just west of Antero attracted them. The salt was later mined by early settlers in the valley.

Some people have an intense interest in nature as I and our granddaughter Katie do. We were travelling north toward Hartsel on State Highway Nine one day. We have frequently seen well over a hundred deer in that stretch of road in early spring. We had seen many mule deer, buffalo and antelope that day. She said to us: "I want to come back to Colorado when I get married so that my husband will know that I want to live where the buffalo roam and the deer and the antelope play." Another day we were travelling north from State Highway 24 on Elkhorn road and she said: "Grandpa, will you tell me about the science and animals along this road?" You can guess by now that I love to talk about nature and science and that made my day.

We have travelled every road and trail that we know of in the National forest on the east over the last 28 years. We have seen wild turkeys, black bears, deer, antelope, many elk, snowshoe hares, coyotes, porcupines, badgers, squirrels, muskrats, bobcats and many birds including bald eagles. Of course we've seen nearly all of them at various times right in Wildwood, just fewer of them.

A few of our animals are rarely seen. For example, we have had a few Albers squirrels visit the birdbath to drink but they don't stay. They are several times larger than our grey pine squirrels and have distinctive upright ears that are over an inch long. The ones that have visited us have been black and occasionally a silver black. They apparently live exclusively on ponderosa pine nuts. I have never heard anyone else mention seeing them at Wildwood.

Years ago we had quite a few snowshoe hares around that would turn pure white in winter. One stayed around in our yard through several summers and then disappeared. They are much larger than our ubiquitous cottontail and don't have the large ears of the jackrabbits. The rabbit population goes through cycles as do the coyotes. We see more bobcats and coyotes around when the rabbit population is up. One day we saw a beautiful reddish brown lynx with long ear tufts that was nearly twice as large as a bobcat. It was in the aspens on Superstition Road. They thrive on snowshoes. The rabbit population seems to have hit another low in 2008.

We generally have a lot of chipmunks, gophers and a few golden mantle ground squirrels around. They seemed to disappear one summer. I saw a weasel several times that summer and knew why the chipmunks were scarce. I had a lot of experience with them where I grew up in Idaho. They will kill a small chicken and suck the blood until the comb and waddles lose all of their red color. I would find them swimming around in the alfalfa fields when I would irrigate. They are mean little guys. Of course being a kid I would tease them. They would attack my shovel and bite it hard. Weasels change colors from yellowish grey in summer and turn white in winter except for their black-tipped tails. They are referred to as ermine when harvested in the winter.

We have had some interesting experiences with the wildlife at Wildwood. The badgers are the weasels larger cousins and just as fearless and ferocious. They are a nuisance when they start

digging for ground squirrels and prairie dogs. They are normally very vicious and rarely seen. However one day a young badger came right up to our door like a young beggar. It was really neat to watch but it didn't get invited in. It didn't behave like a normal badger. We left it alone and it wandered away. One day we saw two of them digging a squirrel out along Ute Trace. It was unusual since they are quite solitary. They would emerge half way out of the hole and look at us. Then they would duck down in the hole and dig again. They can really kick a rooster tail of dirt up behind them. I see their tale-tell excavations from time to time. We have seen several this summer.

One of the most interesting sights is to watch a coyote in an open meadow after gophers. They will stand rigid with one paw up just like a pointer hunting dog. They listen and watch intently then pounce at the slightest noise or motion. They do this unsuccessfully many times before catching their prey. They are so occupied that they tend to forget that you are there.

I have fun interacting with the coyotes. We will occasionally hear one in the evening and I mimic it by barking back. It will frequently answer over and over. On occasion a second coyote will answer from a different direction and we get a three way chorus going.

Twenty-eight years ago the area was quite primitive. Our open range area has been leased by several different Land and cattle companies over the years. A Texas company had the lease for a few years. Wild horses ranged the area and there were many times more cattle than there are now. Cattle are not thought of now days as wild animals but those Texas cattle were really wild. The herd bulls were horned, mean and dangerous. One morning we took a picnic and were just roaming around. We noticed two large bulls fighting in the meadow about a mile south of us. We approached them as close as we dared, above them and behind some rocks. They fought for what seemed like hours over a patch of ground that had a large ant hill in the center. They were very large, evenly matched and ferocious. They would bellow, paw the earth over their backs and charge and gore each other. Before long they were both covered with blood. We eventually tired of the spectacle and spent the day in the national forest. It was evening when we returned back by the meadow. By this time the bulls were behind a fence but right by the road about thirty feet away. They stood about six feet apart and just glared at each other. Their foreheads between their horns were rubbed raw and appeared to be just masses of blood. Their bodies were covered with blood. They were too tired to be ferocious any longer but still were not ready to give up. They would slowly walk up to each other, put their heads together and push, then back away about six feet, then repeat it all. It was awesome. I grew up around cattle but had never seen anything like this match.

One time I left my leather gloves on the deck over night. One of them was missing the next morning. Also we had noticed cantaloupe rinds missing and Faye had lost a spoon. This was a mystery that we conjectured about for several days. The primary theory was that our neighbor's dog had packed my glove off but dogs don't generally pack off spoons or rinds that we knew of. I

had an old '68 pickup that was using a little oil so I usually checked my oil before we started for home. I raised the hood and guess what I found? There was a packrat nest with my glove, several cantaloupe rinds, pop can rings, Faye's spoon and other assorted shiny objects. I didn't know that we had packrats at Wildwood at that time. We've learned since then that they are in fact quite common, can be a nuisance and do damage. I have addressed this in my article on rodent control.

The most exciting experience with our Wildwood wildlife was with our black bear visitors on July 28, 2008. Bears have damaged some of my bird houses and neighbors bird feeders in the past but we never saw one until last summer. I am generally up before dawn each morning. I noticed movement by my bird feeder. It looked like a man standing at it. Upon taking a closer look in the predawn darkness, I could see a large bear eating out of the feeder about twenty feet off the deck. It dropped down on all fours; ambled off about six feet; reared up and put its back against a metal post. It rubbed back and forth just like a human would do. I quickly woke Faye up and found the camera. Two bears took off running when I opened the door. A few minutes later we noticed one of them off the deck on the east side. We took some pictures but it was still dark and all we got were black pictures with two white eyes.

On August 24 we returned and found several indicators that the bears had been back. The bird feeder perch was broken out, the empty trash barrel was tipped over and there was bear scat with seeds in it scattered around. At 6:05 A.M. on September 4, I noticed a young bear standing at the feeder. We grabbed the cameras and got numerous still and movie pictures of it. It finally crawled under the gate and left. I threaded a 3/4" rebar rod through a section of conduit and raised the feeder to ten feet. Faye was fixing dinner at 5:45 P.M. and noticed the bear was back lapping up seeds off the ground. It had bent the feeder pole over at a 45 degree angle. We took more pictures and the bear wouldn't leave. I finally shot him in the rump with a BB. He then ran over to a tall ponderosa and climbed it as fast as a human can run. After several more BBs, he climbed down and ran down by the road but stayed on our property. We could see him until dark, peeking over a large log watching the house. At dusk I saw him return and shot him with another BB. At that point I removed the feeder entirely. A few days later I mounted the feeder on a 3"x10' pole filled with rebar. We had no further bear problems in 2008.

The DOW personnel at the State Fair confirmed what most of us know but don't take as serious as we should. Wildlife activity is generally in search of food. Mice, chipmunks, squirrels, packrats and yes, black bears, are attracted to our bird feeders. Bird feeders should be mounted on very sturdy poles and at least ten feet high. Garbage should never be left out and either burned or carried away when we leave. Our wildlife can be entertaining and exciting to watch. However, we have to remember that our animals can also be dangerous and treat them accordingly.

Del Bills is a 28 year Wildwood resident; past Board President; retired electrical engineer; long time Boy Scout leader; a rural farming/ranching boyhood heritage; with an intense interest in nature. You can contact him at [www. delbertbills@msn.com](http://www.delbertbills@msn.com).

# Wildlife at Wildwood



Delbert Viewing Nature from Our Bay Window



Bay Window View, Bird Feeder and Bath



Black Bear Viewed from Our Deck



Buffalo 3 miles south of Hartsel



Antelope along Arapahoe Trail



Deer along Elkhorn Road