

A wealth of wildlife, right in the backyard

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Roland Kays with a kinkajou. His new project: finding wildlife in Triangle backyards, with help from citizen scientists.

Zoologist Roland Kays travels the world to study rare species, so he calls it a "cool surprise" to find a wealth of wildlife in the suburban backyards of Raleigh and Durham, N.C.

"As scientists, we've traditionally thought of residential areas as non-habitat," says Kays, a faculty member at NC State University and the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences. "But in fact we found that some backyards had more [wildlife](#) than the woods nearby."

Kays' latest research, published in the journal *Urban Ecosystems*, started as a [citizen science project](#) featured at the opening of the museum's new Nature Research Center in 2012. Volunteers, including those with chicken coops near their homes, installed backyard camera traps to capture images of wildlife. Animals caught on film were identified by undergraduate wildlife students at NC State.

Although 5 percent of the world consists of developed urban areas, little research has focused on backyard wildlife, aside from studies of bird species, Kays says.

The North Carolina project, however, found an array of mammals in residential areas, with one important exception. "Fenced-in yards with dogs had little wildlife, though fenced yards without a dog had more," Kays says.

Overall, though, cottontail rabbits, gray squirrels and Virginia opossums were more likely to be in backyards than in surrounding woodlots. Raccoons and gray foxes were found equally in both habitats.

Interestingly, raccoons were the predators most likely to hang around chicken coops. "It was not the fox in the henhouse in this case," Kays says, with a chuckle. He adds that a camera trap caught one neighbor stealing eggs in her bathrobe, though human predators were not factored into the study.

Deer showed up only in woodlots, despite the fact that they're garden pests in many cities. Only two bobcats and coyotes were spotted, in more

rural areas, not an unexpected finding because larger predator species prefer less fragmented habitat than backyards. However, Kays was surprised that chipmunks were few and far between, probably because the region is on the edge of their geographic range.

Kays is now seeking volunteers for more comprehensive research on backyard wildlife funded by the National Science Foundation. His goal is to expand the citizen science project to 1,500 locations over 18 months. He's looking to sign up Triangle families and start mammal monitoring projects in middle schools. Kays is also seeking hunters, who may already own camera traps, to sign up. These motion-sensitive cameras are triggered to take short videos whenever a warm-blooded animal walks by. The cameras are silent, with an infrared flash, so animals are typically unaware of being photographed.

More information: "Mammals in and around suburban yards, and the attraction of chicken coops." Roland Kays, Arielle Waldstein Parsons *Urban Ecosystems* January 2014. [DOI: 10.1007/s11252-014-0347-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11252-014-0347-2)

For more information about taking part in the study, visit the emammal website: emammal.wordpress.com/2014/02/...ity-in-raleigh-area/

Provided by North Carolina State University

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