



## Wildlife Encounters

By Sarah Preiss-Farzanegan, M.D.  
UCCE El Dorado County Master Gardener

Lately, I have realized that my Jersey-girl roots have made me a tad naïve when it comes to wildlife in El Dorado County. Having grown up in a very rural area, I am very good at spotting nocturnal critters while driving at night, notably deer, raccoon, and opossum, and I remember seeing one or two black bears in my youth and not being much affected by it. Two recent wildlife encounters have left me wiser and more wary, and also pondering just how close is too close?

The first encounter was more of a close-proximity sighting. I live in a very residential area in eastern El Dorado County, close to Folsom Lake. Our household rises early so around 6 am one September morning, I opened the curtains and saw a bushy tail streak across the yard. I remember thinking, that's odd, and looked down to see our white bushy-tailed dog sitting next to me. It took a good ten seconds for the image to register in my sleep-befuddled brain, and I calmly informed my husband, "there is a rather large coyote in the backyard, would you please do something about it?" The male coyote, as I assume it was the larger of the sexes, must have followed a cat or squirrel through the fence at first. When my husband found him, he was checking out our fruit trees but he promptly vacated the premises, with a Houdini-like performance of squeezing through the vertical steel bars of the fence, I might add, when threatened with a well-aimed ping from an air gun. For one or two weeks after that day, I took the dog out on a leash in the backyard, flinched at any movement I saw in the bushes through the windows, and brightly told my young children that daily chalk play on the driveway for thirty minutes after lunch was "super fun!!" When seriously threatened or frightened coyotes will avoid humans; in fact, the El Dorado County website agricultural section advises that "whenever possible, coyotes should be harassed or scared to condition them to avoid humans."<sup>1</sup> It was highly unlikely that any individual from that coyote family would return to our yard, yet I felt very vulnerable.

The second encounter was just last week, and now that I think about it, I was standing in the same spot in my bedroom when I saw the creature; except this time it was inside my house. It was late, the dog had just plopped down on her favorite rug by the door, and I was walking by her to the bathroom when I saw what looked like a really big worm on the carpet, right next to the dog's bed. "That's a big worm," I remember thinking, and I leaned closer to double check its

identity. That's when I saw its tongue flick out at me, as if the thing was taking offense from being mistaken for a segmented invertebrate. Having some prior experience with rattlesnakes, I mentally excluded that species right away since this foot-long-plus specimen had a very small head that was not triangular in shape, no rattle, and its color was gray-brown with no particular markings. Surprisingly it was quite sluggish being in the warmth, but even more surprising was the lack of any concern shown by the dog, and who nearly stepped on the snake when I called her away. The exit strategy worked very well, thanks to the calm and level-headed coaching by my husband over the phone, and when enticed onto the dog's rug by the fresh night air out the open door, I managed to flick the snake out the door. Actually, I threw the rug out the door like a hail-Mary touchdown pass and slammed the door behind it. After a 15-minute search of the entire bedroom and bathroom I was able to relax a bit and half an hour later I even fell asleep. But I haven't had a more restless night's sleep since the baby video monitor broke.

All in all, there was no harm done, aside from a small pellet-sized bruise on one coyote haunch and one night of very poor quality sleep. And these experiences prompted lengthy research forays, from which I learned quite a lot about coyotes, polished my knowledge of local serpents, and educated myself about some other "wildlife problems" common to El Dorado County.<sup>1</sup> And I was reminded that however much I love being able to live with the outdoors here in Northern California, I cannot forget to respect its non-human inhabitants and remember that I am not the only one who lives here.

<sup>1</sup>For more in-depth information about coyotes, snakes, and other pertinent local wildlife, visit the El Dorado County website agriculture section at: <http://www.edcgov.us/Government/Ag/Coyotes.aspx>. You can reach your local Agricultural Commissioner at 530-621-5520.

Learn the theory and technique for turning household waste into valuable and rich garden soil at this Saturday's Master Gardener class. Master Gardener Thorne Barrager will teach you how to be productive at composting; the free class is open to the public and will be from 9:00 am to noon at the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court, Placerville.

Master Gardener Program Training will be in El Dorado County in 2014, beginning on January 31 and classes will be most Fridays through June 13. If you are interested in applying for the Master Gardener program, call our office at 530-621-5528 and sign up for one of two informative orientation meetings on Thursday, November 14, from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. or Friday, November 15, from 10:00 to 11:00 a.m. at the Bethell-Delfino Agriculture Building, 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. Applications are due by 5:00 p.m., Monday, December 2, 2013. Visit our website at <http://ucanr.edu/becomeamastergardener> for more information about the program and training.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at [http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/). Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.