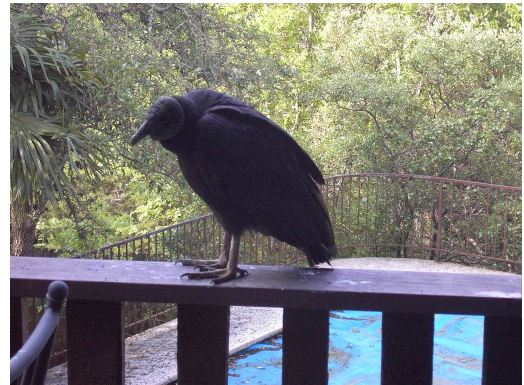


## Wildlife at my Austin Texas Home

I shared my home on Shadow Mountain Drive in Austin, Texas with my wife Joanne as well as many interesting creatures. During the spring of 1993, Purple Martins moved into the multi-unit nesting box which had been left by the previous house owner. This interesting bird, a swallow, which is really not purple, spent the entire day flying around over our swimming pool catching insects which were then used to feed the young birds. It was fascinating to watch them! What could be next? One day while standing near the fireplace I heard a sound coming down the chimney. I listened closely, and heard a flapping sound. When I went outside and looked up at the chimney opening I could see small birds flying into the chimney. I knew immediately that I had Chimney Swifts nesting in my fireplace chimney. I began to think that my home was a wildlife sanctuary!

Later that spring when I was out on the deck at night, I heard the distinctive wailing call of Screech Owls. Now, bear in mind that my house was in the city of Austin not far from the state capitol and all the traffic and noise of the city. What could possibly be next? Well, a few months later, late at night, I heard the distinctive call of a Great Horned Owl. The sound was coming down the chimney. I went outside and aimed a spotlight up at the chimney, and sure enough, there was the owl calling. I now had two species of owls near my house. A few years later, the total became three when a Barred Owl was heard calling behind the house late at night.

Now for the most interesting story that I have to tell. One day, a Black Vulture suddenly landed on the rear deck of the house. I was fascinated and watched as it hopped around and looked at its reflection in the large window. It seemed to think the reflection was another vulture! Then the next day two vultures returned and I assumed they were a pair, male and female. They looked around and seemed to like what they saw because they both returned the next day. I felt it was time to name the birds so I did just that. I called them Horace and Honey! Day after day, both Horace and Honey returned. They were a bit awkward when they hopped around on the deck, but when they took off, they would leave from a perched position on the rail, spread their wings, launch themselves, and in a few seconds would be far away, effortlessly gliding. However, things were getting really serious. It became obvious that they wanted to nest on my deck! Sure enough, the next morning I found a single egg on the deck floor. At this point, I felt things had gone too far. I removed the egg and gave it to an ornithology professor at the University of Texas. I then installed a contraption to scare the vultures away whenever they returned. Reluctantly, a few days later, they left, and I never saw them on the deck again. From time to time, I think I see old Horace gliding high in the sky above the house, and I waive to him!



After my wife Penny moved into the house, we put up a bird feeder and stocked it with a mixture of seed. We also hung a hummingbird feeder. Over the next few weeks, we began to get many interesting species such as Lesser Goldfinch, House Finch, Carolina Chickadee, Black crested Titmouse, Blue jay as well as several species of woodpecker including Red-bellied, Ladder-backed, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers. The hummingbird feeder attracted Ruby throated Hummingbird and Black chinned Hummingbirds. The trees near our house developed berries which attracted beautiful Cedar Waxwings

in very large numbers. They would consume the berries and then use our water bath. Occasionally, we had uncommon species such as the Baltimore Oriole and American Redstart.

Birds don't tell the entire story as I will relate to you now. Grey squirrels were everywhere and became a nuisance, so I decided to capture and release them in a remote area. To do this I purchased a large trap. When a squirrel entered, the door would close, trapping the individual inside. After dozens of squirrels have been caught and released, I began to notice a different type of squirrel. After some research, I realized I had a Round Squirrel, a squirrel which does not climb trees, but rather nests underground. Eventually, Penny and I saw an entire family of four young and the mother come out of the ground in our side yard.



As I continued to trap squirrels of both types, I began to catch other interesting creatures. The first was a opossum, the next a raccoon. Then, one day, the biggest surprise of all. When I went to check the trap one morning, there was a Striped Skunk. Now, catch-and-release took on a whole new meaning. I carefully approached the trap and covered it with a tarp. Then picked it up and slowly put it in the trunk of the car. When I got to the release area, I carefully removed the covered trap opened the door and moved away. As far as the skunk was concerned, there was no problem at all! He just slowly walked out of the trap and into the woods.

What other creatures could possibly be around my house? Well, how about a fox! Several were seen over the years. The most exciting creatures near my house was a family of coyotes that moved in nearby. We would hear them howling in the early morning and late in the day. Several were seen walking around the neighborhood. People began to report missing pets such as cats and small dogs. Finally, the state wildlife department came, captured the family and took them away.



Now, if you thought there nothing more to report, you would be wrong. One of the most common animals in the neighborhood was the White-tailed Deer. One time there were as many as eight individuals in the front yard! We had magnificent horned stags and females as well. From time to time, a young deer was born right in the front yard. The mother would leave it for a while, then return and take it away.

To sum up, my home in Austin Texas, located only a few miles from the state capitol building, in a city of nearly one million people, was home to some very interesting creatures!