

A Walk on Kentucky's Wild Side

What does wild mean to you? Wild usually means undomesticated, uncultivated, unrestrained, or animalistic. These may not seem like very becoming traits, but it perfectly describes nature's wildlife. So why is preserving these uncharacteristic traits of wildlife important? Let's take a walk on Kentucky's wildside and experience it for ourselves.

We can start our walk among the terrestrial animals. Kentucky's most common land animals are the white tailed deer, the eastern gray squirrel, and the raccoon. (Bird Watching HQ, 2023). According to the *Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources*, "The fish and wildlife resources of Kentucky are incredibly diverse, including nearly 1,000 animal species." (2023). They further explain that, "[A] few dozen of these species are classified as game (animals that are fished, hunted or trapped)" and other species are considered "Kentucky Wild". (2023). Our commonwealth is fortunate to have such diverse species that are important to us because of their effect on land. *Wildlife in the Balance* states, "Our wildlife is essential to maintaining the biodiversity processes that build ecosystems and deliver soil fertility and food security." (2021).

Next stop on our excursion is the aquatic animals. This group hosts a variety of animals who mostly live and thrive in lakes, rivers, or ponds. According to the article *Sustaining America's Aquatic Biodiversity*, "Our aquatic wildlife are important sources of food, energy, jobs, atmospheric oxygen, buffers against new diseases, pests, and predators, and protection against food shortages and global climate change." (Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, n.d.). Throughout the trek, you might feast your eyes on Kentucky's famous water creatures such as bass, bluegill, crappie, fish fauna such as minnows, darters, and more. Some water animals in Kentucky are not even seen by most people. (Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, 2023). They explain

that these fish species “serve as subtle indicators of water quality and the overall health and integrity of aquatic ecosystems.” (Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, 2023). Not only do fish serve as food sources, the plankton living within the bodies of water serve as forms of oxygen making this group vital to life.

The last stop on our journey is through the aerial group of animals. As you look into the sky you may see northern cardinals, eastern bluebirds, ruby-throated hummingbirds, and maybe even a flying squirrel. (Bird Advisors, 2023). They are essential to humans because they “play a vital role in controlling pests, acting as pollinators, and maintaining island ecology.” (CK-12 Foundation, 2022). These animals help keep native species alive and aid in preserving certain trees that provide us with medicines, oxygen, fruit, and many of our necessities. Some act as protectors from other invasive species, serving as a natural pest control. Without birds farmers would require stronger pesticides. Birds also disperse seeds that keep vegetation growing.

Although Kentucky’s land is rich in diverse wildlife, it is declining rapidly. According to the Jim Claypool tabloid, “There are 47 threatened and endangered species in Kentucky.” (2023). We house the world’s longest cave system through Mammoth Cave. It is full of species found nowhere else on this planet. According to the National Park Service, “Mammoth Cave has eighteen species that are listed on the federal endangered species list.” (2023). The extinction of animals would mean carbon dioxide in the atmosphere would drastically decline. This would cause plants to suffer and potentially be unable to perform photosynthesis. Meaning, oxygen for humans would deplete, affecting human population and health.

The first step to stopping the extinction crisis would be to focus on the habitat. According to *Conserve Energy Future*, “Human activities like agriculture expansion, logging, and poaching are usually the biggest causes of flora and fauna extinction and biodiversity loss.” (Rinkesh,

2023). As expansion occurs, we destroy animal habitats. A way to halt this is to conserve and protect vulnerable land by creating nature conservatories. But by national and state funding, only a small percentage is protected. As a citizen, you can take part in changing this action. If you are unable to lobby legislation for change, you can start by turning your own backyard into a wildlife conservatory. You can plant native vegetation for animals to feed on. Invasive species can be harmful to wildlife. Make sure you complete research to help replace these plants with native ones. Refrain from feeding wildlife the food you eat because you may be unaware of its harm. Also, wildlife comfort level with humans should be distant. This prevents injury to them. Don't cut down healthy essential trees. These are habitats for vulnerable squirrels, birds, and other species. Prevent usage of pesticides to eliminate any potential health complications. Create brush piles to provide sanctuaries to animals. *Farm and Dairy* explains, "Brush piles provide a resting spot, escape cover, and den sites for wildlife." (Welch, 2022). Another way we can provide improvements is to be respectful on your path. Pick up trash along the way, and recycle what you can, especially near rivers, lakes, and bodies of water. This prevents aquatic animals from being harmed by plastics and harmful chemicals. Another beneficial way to protect Kentucky's wild side is by joining or donating to trusted foundations, such as *Kentucky Wild*, to get hands-on involvement. (Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, 2023). You can participate in efforts to rebuild habitats back to their original state. These steps may seem like such simple actions, but they will make an impact for a positive change.

So now we've circled through our walk, back to where we started. When reflecting on our walk, what kind of view would you want your children, grandchildren, or future generations to see? It is devastating to lose animals seeing as, "each time a species goes extinct, the world around us unravels a bit." (Center for Biological Diversity, n.d.). It's time to circle back to the

wild. Let's ensure our footprints are leaving behind the right impression for our own wellbeing, our future generations, and for Kentucky's wild.

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