

Wildlife in Your Own Backyard

In Southern Nevada, encounters with wildlife can happen anywhere — even on a patio chair. Here are the furry and feathered visitors you may find in your neighborhood.

by Janna Karel



PHOTOGRAPHY CREDIT
John Dietrich

It was a cool spring afternoon. A pine tree cast a shadow over my backyard — and on the back of a patio chair sat a hawk. Its chest was speckled brown and white, its long tail striped gray. When it turned to peer at me, its strong beak curved as if surprised to see me.

“They were definitely here first,” Claire Clarke, the Urban Wildlife Education Coordinator for the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), says of my visiting Cooper’s hawk, “so if resources are available and they’re accessible, there’s always the potential that you could have a coyote or a rabbit or something like that come into your yard.”

Birds

Common poorwills are native to Southern Nevada — often mistaken for baby owls for their fluffy plumage and nocturnal habits. As spring settles in, hummingbirds will reappear, performing spins and dives in the air to attract mates. Larger migratory birds like raptors and Canada geese may extend their stay in Las Vegas if they find a nice place to nest.



Cooper's Hawk



Western Banded Gecko

Reptiles

In addition to native tortoises found in the area of Red Rock Canyon, neighborhood sidewalks often teem with hand-sized fence lizards in summer. And wide-eyed western banded geckos may hide in damp irrigation boxes.

Mammals

Summer nights are marked by small-faced hoary bats that choose Las Vegas as a stopover point during migration. And desert cottontails can be seen hopping between shrubs. Clarke says most of the calls she receives at her NDOW office involve coyotes, which have learned to thrive in neighborhoods.

Living With Wildlife

While we might imagine animals are happier in areas without people, Clarke says that water access, proximity to mountains and desert spaces, and new food sources create their own kind of habitats. Coyotes forage for trash and outside pet food. Cooper’s hawks like the one in my backyard feast on pigeons. Staying safe means leaving animals alone — even feeding them may train them to rely on humans. And while migratory birds may alight in Sunset Park and bighorn sheep graze at Hemingway Park, Southern Nevada wildlife may already be perched quietly in your yard. 🦅