



My Backyard Jungle: The Adventures of an Urban Wildlife Lover Who Turned His Yard into Habitat and Learned to Live with It

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For James Barilla and his family, the dream of transforming their Columbia, South Carolina, backyard into a haven for wildlife evoked images of kids catching grasshoppers by day and fireflies at night, of digging up potatoes and picking strawberries. When they signed up with the National Wildlife Federation to certify their yard as a wildlife habitat, it felt like pushing back, in however small a way, against the tide of bad news about vanishing species, changing climate, dying coral reefs. Then the animals started to arrive, and Barilla soon discovered the complexities (and possible mayhem) of merging human with animal habitats. What are the limits of coexistence, he wondered? To find out, Barilla set out across continents to explore cities where populations of bears, monkeys, marmosets, and honeybees live alongside human residents. *My Backyard Jungle* brings these unique stories together, making Barilla's yard the centerpiece of a meditation on possibilities for coexistence with animals in an increasingly urban world. Not since Gerald Durrell penned *My Family and Other Animals* have readers encountered a naturalist with such a gift for storytelling and such an open heart toward all things wild.

My Backyard Jungle: The Adventures of an Urban Wildlife Lover Who Turned His Yard into Habitat and Learned to Live with It Details

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Emily Steele says

This book had a lot of potential at the start but it seemed like the author just scraped the surface of how people interact with wildlife. Mostly because he wanted to travel to India and Brazil. I was expecting more truthfully

Erin says

I absolutely positively loved this book! When I requested it from NetGalley, I was worried that it could potentially be a little bit boring. Well, let me tell you, I actually couldn't put it down! Barilla's writing style is so engaging and interesting, you get sucked right in to his subject matter.

This book made me think twice about all the little critters that are living around my home. Possums, raccoons, mice, rats - in some cases (not near me!) monkeys and bears!! I can't even imagine having a bear den under my deck and not know about it. But it happens all the time in areas where there are bears.

Barilla talks about the relationship between animals and the ever shrinking areas they live in. They are forced to adapt or die out. And most of the time, like they say in Jurassic Park, "Life finds a way". Life changes, but it still goes on. Sometimes. Obviously, not all the time, and animals still struggle everyday to survive in our new world. My Backyard Jungle focuses however on more successful cases than not so successful. Barilla travels the world, investigating and seeing just how animals live around some of the most populated areas of the world. He relates this back to his own life, and to the lives of people like me and parts of America, the suburban world. Probably the chapter that I liked least was the chapter where Barilla followed an animal removal agent around. I felt sad for the animals that find there ways into homes - I know that I am not a fan myself, for however much I love animals. I still don't want a dead possum in my walls or rats in the attic.

The chapter I enjoyed the most was about bees, in particular the growing apiarist community in Brooklyn. One hive of bees produced red honey one year, and it was discovered they were getting their sugar from a maraschino cherry factory! I knew that the honey from bees would match what is in their environment, like lavender etc. but learning about the maraschino cherry honey was crazy! And to make it worse, it was terrible tasting as well as bad for you, due to all the Karo syrup.

One thing Barilla did in an effort to share urban space with nature was have his backyard certified through the National Wildlife Federation as a wildlife habitat. I was inspired to do the same, and my husband has agreed to help me, and even is excited as well. He agreed to build me a few bird houses, and even volunteered to add a small pond to our yard. It doesn't seem too terribly hard, and I am already halfway there. I am trying to focus more on fauna that begins with the letter b, such as birds and butterflies, bees and bats- I don't think my neighbors would like it if I enticed vermin to the area.

I really loved this book, and after I read that Barilla teaches creative nonfiction at the University of South Carolina, it made sense as to why this book was so readable. I think it is an interesting and informative read,

and should be given a try.

And did you know that monkeys live in a small area of Florida? I didn't, but now I do.

Susan says

Based on the title, this book is not quite what I had expected. Barilla does touch on his own work in his own yard, but also takes a much more philosophical approach of looking at human-wildlife interactions in urban areas in different parts of the world. For me, that actually made for a better book than what I had been expecting (a more focused look at planting and animals in his yard alone).

I appreciated the questions Barilla raised about urban wildlife and how wild animals and humans might coexist in urban centres, including the benefits and challenges for both. I also really enjoyed that while Barilla took his adventures as far away as Brazil and India, he also tied them back to the squirrels, possum, and other critters in his own yard and home.

Finally, I thought it was great that Barilla took a humble, curious approach rather than a prescriptive, preachy one. Barilla does share with the readers his own actions, ideas, and preferences, but is always cognizant of the fact (and lets the reader know this fact) that he does not feel he is the person with 'all the answers'. Instead, he is someone with lots of questions about what is working, what is not working, what is being done, what might be done, with a full awareness of the complexities and layers, and unknowns (both generally and from his personal perspective) involved in relationships between humans and urban wildlife.

It was very satisfying to travel on Barilla's adventures with him, if only vicariously through this book. It was also very satisfying to chew over the questions of human-wildlife coexistence with Barilla. I am certain I will continue to think about these questions in the future.

karen says

so this is a book about where ideology and reality clash. mr. barilla finally becomes a homeowner, has a bit of land and a family, and wants to create a little ecological paradise in his backyard. a place where nature can be nature, and he can sit amongst his fruit trees and watch animals frolic while he eats a homegrown, sun-ripened peach, all things harmonious.

so he has his backyard certified by the national wildlife federation as a nature sanctuary, buys a bunch of fruit trees, follows all the rules, but then realizes that it is a bit more complicated than he had imagined.

because what do you do - what is your responsibility as a sanctuary when a single squirrel strips all of your expensive peach trees? what happens when an animal burrows into your house and keeps you awake with its scratching and scrabbling crawlspace investigations? can you really allow a bear to live under your porch when you have young children?

because this would be great, in theory:

but, you know, sometimes animals get angry:

or nosy

or just destructive

and all the optimism and good intentions might not be enough to prevent nature from doing what nature does - surviving any way it can, even if it means inconveniencing humans.

so this begins his exploration of places where wild animals have already crossed over into human territories, and blurred the line between wild and urban designations, and what level of co-existence is possible.

because for all his good intentions, sometimes it is unclear what is the right thing to do. what do i do with this turtle i found in the road? do i protect it from cars and plop it somewhere, or does that screw the turtle up on its path to its breeding habitat? do i rescue this half-frozen lizard and take it home to heal, or does this confuse nature's fragile balance?

he explores the population of green monkeys in dania beach, florida, and sees how the people there have learned to co-exist with the creatures.

they are just getting too smart...

then he goes to delhi, to witness their "monkey menace"

which is a very interesting chapter, and between the monkeys and the terrifying traffic situation, really reinforces my desire to never ever go to there.

and then he spends some time following a trapper around in his south carolina, where he himself is living, and learns all about the murky ethics of what to do when your home has been invaded by possums, rats, and bats.

and then off to northampton, mass, where bears hang out under people's porches, wait for them to go to work, and then roam freely through the town.

and what book would be complete without a look at the new hipster hobby of beekeeping in brooklyn?
bees?

bees

which, after learning about "the red honey," makes me want to swear off honey altogether for a little while.
(which i failed at, since i totally had some at lunch today)

then it's off to brazil to see the black-tufted marmosets

[image error]

and then a little glimpse into animal trafficking and rescue and relocation. which was also very illuminating.
and depressing.

but then it gets cute again, back in brazil, with the golden lion-headed tamarins

which are delightful, but also with a little attitude

but so these are in competition with the golden lion tamarins.

which are similar, but not the same, you tamarin-racist.

and it gets a little muzzy, again, because the golden lion tamarins' numbers have been successfully restored
through human intervention, but just not in their proper territory.

golden lion tamarins are *the only primate species whose fortunes have improved enough to be downlisted from Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species to Endangered.*

but now the golden lion-headed tamarins are making a move into the territory of the golden lion tamarins, which is where they "should" be, and will be competing for resources, so the "invasive" species will have to be moved. and the people who have been living amongst them, and have helped bring them back from danger and grown as attached to them as "pets," are resisting.

so it gets to be a complex situation.

but the best thing about this book is introducing me to this organization:

<http://www.rareconservation.org/>

they do very interesting work. barilla asserts that in order to help save species, while still respecting their status as wild animals,

You need a metaphoric sense of ownership balanced by the recognition that these are wild animals, not household pets.

An organization called Rare specializes in this kind of work. Their Pride Campaigns use commercial marketing tactics to create a sense of protective ownership for unique local species. Every campaign has a mascot, a friendly face to rally around, even if it's a "crawfish." Kids want their pictures taken with the creature; mayors want their picture taken, too. Gradually, the cultural norms shift towards awareness and protection. The approach has proven very successful: the first Pride Campaign...saved the Saint Lucia parrot from extinction by transforming the bird into a folk hero. As with many of the creatures in Rare's growing menagerie, the parrot mascot has become an enduring symbol of island identity, and it still appears in costume at festivals.

which sounds like a wonderful solution and satisfies the need to near-heart the animal, but also keep the boundaries in place so as to preserve what is "wild" about them.

another quick note is that i love his observation about the monkeylike behavior of people. i like to imagine people are monkeys, too. i do it all the time, mostly when the subway is really crowded, or in boring meeting. soo much better than imagining them naked.

so, yeah - an interesting book about a situation that is not nearly black-white enough. but no pictures. so i had to supply them in my review.

you're welcome.

Cat says

It is a very good sign when you are reading a book and you find yourself referring to it in just about every casual conversation you have during the time you are reading it. This is not always true (you can of course hate a book and not be able to stop talking about it because of your contempt), but it is definitely true in this case. *My Backyard Jungle* is framed by two questions, one global and one local/personal: How can we

imagine wildness persisting, thriving, adapting in urban spaces? A crucial ecological question since more and more of the planet is becoming urbanized and the idea then that wildness should only thrive in reserves or parks seems highly problematic. The second is the personal question "What does it mean to dedicate your own backyard to creating a habitat for wildlife?" Barilla weaves these two questions together in anecdotes about certifying his backyard in Columbia, SC as a wildlife habitat and essays about his travels (to Florida, India, Brooklyn, and Brazil) to seek out places where humans and animals are living in the same urban spaces and negotiating the tensions that that coexistence entails.

Some of the most powerful chapters in the book chart human ambivalence about making spaces for animals in their space; Barilla doesn't just write about the utopian loveliness of butterflies fluttering through your flowerbeds or adorable squirrels romping through tree branches. He writes about rat infestations, carpenter bees and wasps, possums in the crawlspace, squirrels robbing carefully cultivated fruit trees. He draws our attention to the ways that the most dedicated nature lover still experiences the squeamishness of penetrated boundaries when there is a rat in the walls of our home, a space that seems human to us yet nesty and inviting to animals we consider pests and fear because of sharp front teeth and germy mouths. One of the most powerful and toughest chapters of the book for me was the chapter in which Barilla rides along with animal control workers, private contractors basically hired to break the necks of possums and other critters. Barilla points out the complications of relocating animals that might be diseased and that often have strong homing instincts, and he notes the deliberate blindness of many city dwellers and suburbanites to the brutal truth of what it means to "eliminate" a pest from your property.

Barilla's use of his own persona--affable, conscientious, experienced with nature, and yet also willing to admit his own moments of discomfort or ignorance--is engaging and accomplished, understated enough to highlight the big questions that the book is really about but fully threaded throughout the book to suggest our personal place in the ecosystems we observe and transform through our participation. A great example of how this personal engagement works comes in the Brazil chapter when he watches urban marmosets flock around a baby's stroller, and as a parent of young children, he concludes that strollers are snack central and hence a smart target for the noshing primate.

A lot of the places that Barilla goes and things that he sees are just neat, and the dilemmas about human engagement and invasive wildlife that he investigates are not easily resolved and yet are crucially confronted as we try to define our relationship to our homes and to our companions on the planet. This is a really entertaining and thought-provoking book. For a sample, check out Barilla's recent article in The Atlantic: <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/a...>

I should also say that Barilla is a colleague of mine and an awesome guy, so I can't wait to recommend his book to everyone I know. Starting with this Goodreads review.

Aaron says

This book was not what I thought it was going to be based on its subtitle. The focus is less on his own yard habitat than him globe-trotting around examining transitional habitats of different animal species with different human cultures of urban life. That did make it an interesting & informative read, albeit one that jumps around a bit.

Kate says

I received my copy of this book for free through Goodreads.

What a phenomenal book! A must-read for anyone who loves wildlife.

This book goes well beyond one man's attempt to create an urban wildlife habitat. It is an exploration of the existing and potential human, animals and even plant relationships in urban environments. It's about finding balance in a fast-paced world; a balance between all living things, from bears to bees, rats to monkeys (and don't forget the squirrels). Filled to the brim with poignant quotes that really make you think about the mark that we are leaving on this planet and the small adjustments in behaviour and thinking that could lead to a much happier coexistence. An absolutely brilliant book; Barilla's easy writing style and relatable voice made for an engaging and satisfying read.

I'm so very glad this book made its way into my life. It has given me a lot to consider about my educational and personal goals. Thank you.

Foggygirl says

Great read

An excellent read about one persons quest to find his own way to coexist with the creatures who inhabit his backyard and his travels to discover how other countries are dealing with this very real problem from Brazil to India.

Nicola Waldron says

Disclaimer first -- this is my hubby's book, so I'm bound to like it, right! And I appear (briefly -- wished it were more!), which adds another layer of reader reaction, a fun one, like reading a mystery novel almost. Anyway, the thing is, I read the whole thing in two sittings because 1) I love the guy for his quiet philosophical questioning and gentle humor, both of which emerge at unexpected moments of delightful surprise in the narrative, and 2) he can really write. When he's funny, he's really funny. When he's in lyrical mode, he's really lyrical. Best, he allows himself to be a stand-back observer -- he admits up front he's basically a coward and follows on the heels of his various guides, hoping they'll protect him from the wild animals in which he's so interested and invested: a sort of anti-Crocodile Hunter figure; a mock-hero in the realm of the nature narrative. Something different. Enjoyable, educational an thought-provoking. Even if I didn't know him, it would have changed my view on how to live and relate to the natural world. No preaching here -- just a persuasive, entertaining, well-researched bounty. Bravo!

Charles says

A definite disappointment, primarily because the title is so deceptive. I read this book because my backyard is NWF-certified and I was eager to read about other people's experiences with their backyard habitats. The "Adventures" (as proclaimed in the title) of the author turned out to be mostly his adventures looking for monkeys in a few countries around the world. Very little about this book was directly related to the

certification of his yard and its flora and fauna.

As a book about urban monkey populations around the world, this book has some value and there is some interesting info. Nonetheless, out of respect to potential readers, a more accurate title should be chosen.

Florence Millo says

I was disappointed and more than a little annoyed by the "bait and switch" tactics of this book. You would think that a book titled *My Backyard Jungle* would have something to do with the flora and fauna in the writer's back yard. But that is not at all the case. He travels from Florida to India discussing animal life everywhere but his back yard.

Since our backyard is a certified wildlife habitat, I was very much looking forward to reading about how someone else attracted and observed wildlife in their back yard--what they planted, what worked and what didn't. But nothing along those lines. Why on earth the book was titled *My Backyard Jungle* is a mystery to me.

Nikki says

If you came looking for a "nice," feel-good book with straightforward solutions, this is not the book you want to read.

Barilla's writing is steeped in years of field knowledge (as it should be) without being unreadable (though at some points it can be densely packed). It's a narrative most of us know - man wants to give back to the ecosystem by replicating the ecosystem near his own living space - but none of us usually have the opportunity to explore in such depth, at such variety, and with academia at our side. He truly takes no side, exploring as many aspects of human interaction with nature as he possibly can - the good, the difficult, and the ugly (The Modern Rat-Catcher chapter, which managed to make me insufferable to all vegans in my company for the foreseeable future while also reaffirming my stance that no matter the animal or the diseases it may carry, I'm never going to have another pest-animal death on my conscience). It's wildly educational (no pun intended) while being conversational, it addresses the philosophical, the natural, and the scientific without muddle, and it's all around a very well-written book capable of providing more than you knew you needed about the subject.

The answer, not just for him and me but in general, is still "yes" to the idea of replenishing ecology by bringing it into the back yard - if for no other reason than hot pepper wax, which you can use to discourage fuzzy friends from putting their mouths on anything you don't want them to.

Julia says

This is unfortunately one of those books that the title promises so much more than the book actually delivers and was more of a disappointment when I finally got around to read it since it doesn't deliver what it promises the reader. What definitely helped this book to catch my eye was that this book was on a display offered by the local library on ecosystem, especially prairie-based habitats so basically by association and the title itself than the reader is given the idea that this book is based on the author's experience of certifying his backyard as a wildlife spot.

Unfortunately what the reader gets instead is a ranting lecture on coexistence, how it is a good idea that cannot be done along with order and how the author thinks that it may be done even though it still is an impossible dream. Back-and-forth the reader is dragged over the same information while then being dragged all over the world to see how other fauna can be found living side-by-side with humans, what it means for them, the troubles caused and how people are working on fixing the problem when it does become a problem. Then occasionally as an afterthought of what the book should be the reader is given to thoughts and a few minor struggles that the homeowner has with his own house mostly before being dragged back out to track down urban monkeys, suburban bears, etc.

There was no mention of South Carolinian suburban wildlife besides the troublesome squirrels, pesky possums and invasive rats. Even the adorable raccoon is only merely mentioned in passing as the cousin of the coati and a few other very trivial spots while never appearing in the author's yard that we know of.

Again a really disappointing read and although there was some good information for those who like animals and/or animal-human interactions I am sure there are better books out there to read. Even better yet would be an actual book about the backyard wildlife certifying process and experiences that homeowners face with the very wildlife that they have asked into their shared living space....

Lesley says

This title is misleading! I wanted more about his backyard. Who cares about the monkeys in another country!

Peter McLoughlin says

We may feel removed from nature living in our climate controlled housing surrounded by thousands or millions of neighbors in our urban and suburban environment but the animal world doesn't go away just because a lot of people and buildings are around. I have seen Coyotes in Stratford a town of 40,000 people and integrated in the megalopolis between Boston and Washington D.C. sometimes referred to as the Bo-Wash. And it is not just here in the U.S. the Megalopolis far in Delhi India is far larger and it has huge number of langur monkeys. I have seen American Black bears which are a 40 minute drive away from Bridgeport with 150,000 people and an hour and a half drive from NYC (that is about as urban as anyplace). The bears are growing in number and coming closer to the cities. This book is about the wildlife in most peoples backyards literally. You don't have to go to middle of nowhere to study nature and that is the point of the book. If you look around you there is plenty of opportunity to connect with nature and you don't have to go on a camping trip to do it just open your mind and become more alert. it is around you.
