

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

People and Wildlife Living in Harmony

Letter to the Editor

May 2005

There's a forest on a ridge I know, where wild turkeys roam and a great horned owl keeps watch. Past some rocks where a snake basks in the sun, the forest backs up to a golden field, where a fox has its den and its pups play in the grass, learning their wild ways, as they have for centuries. A red-tailed hawk waits on the wire. Patient. So patient. Sharp eyes, hunting for mice. Trickling through, a small stream runs clean and clear and the air is so fresh.

That may be Loudoun today but see the orange ribbons tied around the trees, not as a symbol of remembrance for a loved one, but as a marking of boundaries and plans that forecast the destruction of habitat. Today, the ribbons mean nothing to the fox, the turkeys, the owl, the hawk, or the countless other species that depend on this land, this habitat, to survive. But, in a few weeks, their homes will be gone and lawns and houses will replace them. Where will the wildlife go? Will we miss them when they're gone? Will we remember that they were here first?

The wildlife of Loudoun is at a crossroads of survival. In western Loudoun, we currently have approximately 7,000 homes. With our Board of Supervisors pushing us back to the old comprehensive plan and its A-3 zoning, we will be adding as many as 40,000 new homes to these 7,000. Across Loudoun, primarily east of Leesburg, we already have 45,000 homes waiting in the pipeline, approved and ready to be built; yet, our Board of Supervisors is poised to approve Comprehensive Plan Amendments (CPAMs) in Leesburg and Dulles South to give waivers to developers to add yet another 34,000 new homes to our county. This equates to 129,000 new homes. It means countless acres of land being converted from open space to developed land.

What does this mean for wildlife? The picture is clear. There will be no room for them. With each acre developed, with each tree torn down we demonstrate what we value or don't value. Twenty or thirty years ago, Tyson's Corner looked like the rolling wild hills and fields of Loudoun. Yet decisions were made, roads were built, pavement was poured. Developers prospered. And today, you will not find a great horned owl perched on an office building in Tyson's. You will not find wild turkeys roaming through the parking lot of a mall.

The more we "develop", the more we fragment land into smaller and smaller bits of territory, the fewer places animals have to live and the more diversity we lose. This intricate web of life unravels and we are left with only the few who are able to hold on and adapt but silently the wild slips away, just as the Whip-poor-wills and Upland Sandpipers have been silenced already.

Rachel Carson wrote, "We stand now where two roads diverge...The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road ... offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth. The choice, after all, is ours to make."

Together, we are the stewards of this county and we are responsible for the future. We are responsible to all generations that follow us for what we save *and* what we destroy. For those who see inherent value in the open rolling hills, in the dense forest stands, and in the creatures who live there, now is our time. Now is the only time left to change our course and preserve the wildlife and habitat of Loudoun for the future. To get involved in habitat monitoring and restoration and to speak out on behalf of wildlife and habitat, contact Nicole Hamilton of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy at nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org or 540-882-4839. Where there's a will, there's a way.