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# Hawks and a Year in the Desert

by: Jeanne Kiefer

## THE JOYS OF LIVING AMONG EXOTIC WILDLIFE

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I was headed down my sandy street when I spied them: two enormous hawks balanced precariously on the little Ranch Road street sign. One faced south, one faced north – at eye-level, just a few feet away from me. The white tail patches identified them as Harris’s hawks, a local bird with a four-foot wingspan that doesn’t share the solitary habits of most raptors. They often hunt cooperatively and I’ve seen them flying in pairs or trios in the skies over our land – but never before at such close hand.



photo: Dave Mills

Harris's Hawk

They were a first anniversary present, since the duo appeared on the exact date of our move to Cave Creek one year earlier. That coincidence prompted me to tally up some of the more exotic gifts of wildlife we’ve had in these past 12 months.

One mountain lion. I’m fudging a bit here, since I spotted it while house hunting. But we wound up buying just a mile away so I feel justified in counting this sighting as the first and most amazing gift. In broad daylight, in a development just off Lone Mountain Road, a large tawny cat with a long tail (black tip) melted into the brush about 20 feet from where I stood. I learned later this was a very rare glimpse of a shy desert resident, despite the fact that Arizona has one of the largest populations of the cat.

Three coyotes. We hear the serenade every night and have seen dozens over the course of this year, but these three actually came right onto the back patio. A pair



appeared about noon on our moving-in day, trotting up close to identify the new resident aromas: two humans, one dog. They've kept their distance since (except for a handsome adolescent in spring), but for a time I was anxious about the safety of our pet because our neighbors related dire tales (mostly hearsay) of attacks on small dogs. Library research confirmed that coyotes are opportunists rather than aggressors, so now we just make sure Scout isn't out at night on his own. However, could the coyotes be stealing his toys? His favorite teddy bear has disappeared and another was discovered in the brush about six feet beyond our fence!

Two tarantulas. The first ignored me as it crept slowly across our driveway. When a second one appeared on our doorstep, I touched it gently on its furry, protruding posterior, expecting it to scurry away. However, when it spun around and reared up with waving legs, I was the one who took a big jump back! I now know male tarantulas are prowling for females on August nights and will almost never bite, but they can certainly put on a pretty impressive show.

One Great Horned owl. Against a pearly evening sky, I saw a huge bird land atop a saguaro next to our house. I cautiously inched my way to the base of the cactus, fearing any moment the bird would take fright and fly away. I needn't have worried. Its perch was a few feet above my head now and I could plainly see the large ear tufts and white throat, and I even met the owl's yellow gaze as it briefly glanced down and dismissed me and the dog as unworthy of serious interest.



**How's this for a display of flexibility?  
Great Horned Owl**

Two rattlesnakes. The smaller reptile in May was efficiently whisked away by Rural/Metro. The larger September visitor was draped across our doorstep as Scout and I set out for our nightly stroll. Before I knew it, the dog was on one side of the snake and I was on the other – with the leash stretched tightly between. For a split second I considered the consequences of calling Scout back. Then I



remembered that rattlesnakes are rarely aggressive (according to books), so I took a deep breath and stepped gingerly over the snake, which stayed still and watched this entire procedure. Safely on the other side, it dawned on me that this door was also the only way back into the house! We took an especially long walk that evening, as you can imagine, but when we reluctantly returned the rattler had obligingly moved a few feet to the side and simply observed us tiptoe past. Whew!

One bufo toad. I thought it was a crumpled green garden glove – until it hopped. I knew just enough about the Sonoran Desert Toad (*Bufo alvarius*) to be upset at finding this big, ugly specimen in our garage. Hitting the books once again, I discovered our neighbors' pools probably attracted it, and that the nerve toxin exuded by its skin could be fatal to dogs. (Emergency action: rinse out the pet's mouth and rush to the vet.) Luckily, I haven't seen another.

Many other less dramatic but interesting visitors. The Gambel's quail that chatter in the bushes beside the house, the desert cottontails who brazenly snack on my geraniums, the self-important cardinals and cheeky cactus wrens, the family of packrats (white-throated wood rats) that treats our car as a storage bin for mesquite pods, the chunky collared lizards who sunbathe on our rocks.

With all this abundance, there are still desert creatures I'm hoping to observe in the future: javelinas, bats, jackrabbits, ringtail cats, gila monsters. I'm also looking forward to learning more about the scorpions and lizards that share our acre. And I'm very eager to see what gift Cave Creek anniversary number two will bring!

