



Western Coyote in San Francisco Bay Area.
Photo by Janet Kessler.

All photos courtesy of Janet Kessler.
www.urbanwildness.com

For 35 years Janet Kessler has lived in San Francisco and been an avid early morning walker, exploring the city's parks with her dogs and observing the busy transition between night and day for urban wildlife. Her morning routine and repeated encounters with coyotes, owls, and pretty much every other species inhabiting the city, turned into a photography hobby roughly four years ago. Since then, Kessler has become something of an urban wildlife expert and her photography has been exhibited at the San Francisco Public Library, Thoreau Center for Sustainability, and Randal Museum. She is also author of a self-published booklet on coyotes titled "Myca of Twin Peaks."

As spring turns to summer, WOW asked Kessler for advice on how to catch glimpses of the creatures around us, about her controversial view on invasive species, and how she developed her skills.

WOW: How did you become interested in urban wildlife and photography?

JK: I started with walks in the city, and my walks had to be early because I took my kids to school. I would walk my dogs, and then dog, when one passed away, early, early in the morning. I would encounter some animals, including skunks, some birds, raccoons, and these were very thrilling because you would see a family of them.

In 2007 I was walking up on Twin Peaks with my dogs and around one corner was a coyote. I did not have a camera then, but never again would I be without my camera, because that little coyote performed for us for about 20 minutes. Being an egotist, I thought, "That coyote liked me." And my husband later had to tell me, "It's probably not you. It's probably the dog."

WOW: What do you mean by preformed?

JK: It saw us and jumped up and down, up and down, ran

down the path, came back. I saw lots of intelligence, fun, lots of personality. My photography was a recording device and I still use it as that. I have a good lens (300mm), and as I'm watching animals, I just click, click, click. When I get home and focus in, I see things I would have missed.

I didn't see that coyote again. That was July 2007 and that's when those coyotes were shot in Golden Gate Park. A woman with a ridgeback did not leash it. People were very upset because the dog was chasing a coyote in a den area and it was pupping season. At one point the coyotes got mad, chased her dog and bit the rear end. That's what they do. It's a cattle dog instinct. It's a message "Get up, get away from me. This is mine," but our animal control didn't know what to do so they called California Fish and Game. They brought in their sharp shooters and shot those two coyotes dead.

Later a young one was found dead hit by a car, more than likely one of theirs. I wrote this little booklet after that happened and I called it "[Myca of Twin Peaks](#)." MYC stood for "my coyote" and it was just, "Hey these coyotes are cool." It was just plain fun. And that we don't need to shoot them.

WOW: Where can people find your book?

JK: They are still in bookstores, selling for \$10. I would not have done that book except for Myca stopped being up on Twin Peaks. I never advertise where the coyotes are. The worst thing you can do is advertise. The animals I photograph are very elusive. The mammals are all twilight animals or nocturnal. People have asked how to find them. It's gonna be luck. If you see an animal you might see it again in the same vicinity.

Someone asked if I could lead a tour, and I said, "We're going to get there and no one's going to see anything." It's an individual project, finding animals. Another thing I would never want to take a group of people to gawk at an animal. My primary concern is the animal.

The best place all around for seeing animals: Golden Gate Park. The furry animals are in all the parks. And if I haven't seen them there, I have seen droppings and tracks.

WOW: What other tips can you offer for seeing wildlife while not being seen.

JK: Most of the time I just go on a walk and keep my eyes open. But I've also made special trips out specifically to see animals. [Kessler pointed us to her story about searching for raccoons in Golden Gate Park published [here](#)]

Also, ask other walkers if they've seen anything.

Animals are born in late winter and through the first part of summer. When animals are teenagers, they're full grown but curious. They might look at you. A good time to take pictures of animals is going to be late spring early summer.

WOW: When you go looking, how long and when do you look?

When you're talking about wildlife, you're talking about going and living outside. Some people will be lucky and see a coyote or raccoon or whatever, but it's going to be a chance occurrence. But if you really want to study nature, you're going to have to spend time outside. Get up an odd times. For the fox [picture] I was there at 4 am. For the skunks I was out at 10 at night and then I was out again at 4 in the morning. It's fun. All of these are adventures.

WOW: Are there any books or field guides you recommend?

JK: You know I didn't even study photography. For me, getting out there, trying it is best. I made lots of mistakes. I

tried it and learned from the pictures. Wondered what was wrong with my camera [laughs]. A lot of people wouldn't recommend doing it this way, this is just the way I did it. Other people will tell you, "Oh yeah, I took some course."

WOW: Say a little bit about your views on invasive species.

JK: People tend not to think of wildlife in the parks. They think about renovating the parks, but they're not thinking very hard about wildlife. And now the native plant people say there's a need to kick out any non-native or invasives.

I'm specifically upset at Park and Rec. One thing they did was take out all the Himalayan Blackberry, which is thorny and dense. Birds live in it. It's food for lots of animals. It prevented dogs from going into the underbrush area. It was very protective and because it was non-native they took it all out. It was an excellent plant for animals. Instead of thinking, what's this plant serving? What's its purpose? What's it doing? They just thought, "Oh non-native, out it goes."

There are new studies out by Mark Davis. He's written a book called "[Invasion Biology](#)." He's trying to show that not all non-native plants are harmful. Why spend your resources killing them with poisons when, in fact, who cares?

WOW: It's interesting to think about invasives versus natives in the middle of a metropolis of more than 7 million people.

JK: This is what doesn't make sense. What about us? And now they're calling dogs invasives and non-natives. Who's going to get rid of their dog?

WOW: How do you define nature?

JK: What does nature mean? For me it means leave it alone. This is my approach and it is not everyone else's. Nature is nature. It does its own thing. When we interfere, like threatening to tear down Suto Forest, I think you've gone too far because there are animals that live there, always.

WOW: What do you say about the fact that some invasives are snuffing out other species?

JK: I don't know that much about it. The only one I've really heard about is Cape Ivy. But it is a competitive environment, and some things are going to grow and some things aren't. There is a place for native plants, but not like in recreation areas where we have dogs and children, because you need poisons for the natives. Not in established wildlife habitat areas because animals already live there.

When I complained about needing to protect coyote habitat, one man said, "Oh I wouldn't worry about them. They'll just move." Yeah, well if your house burned down you can just move. I didn't say that, but I was horrified.

WOW: What's your main message about urban wildlife?

JK: That we need to respect them. Respect their space and give them space to live here with us. It's not just for us. Look at them and find out who they are. These coyotes are individuals. Look at it like you would your dog. It's got a personality, a family life. They are very intelligent and they're fascinating.

WOW: In an age when attention spans are shortening how do we get city dwellers to engage with nature?

JK: I had one woman say to me, "You live in a different world." We have to get out of that short-attention-span world that too many of us have inhabited. Go take walks and be outside. Don't take your cell phone. Sit down in a field for a while and watch. For a project my son was doing, he once

had to sit in a field for six hours in the Sierras and come back with what he found. He said it was so boring at first and it was weeks before he started seeing. People have to do the same thing and start learning to see. He started to notice things like that a certain bird was territorial and wouldn't let others near it.

WOW: So even a novice who can't identify species can start to observe wildlife behavior.

JK: Oh yeah. I don't know the names of lots of birds. That's not the important thing in my opinion. There are people who can name all the birds. They don't know anything else about them though except for to say that they saw one.

WOW: Most field guides really stick to physical identification rather than natural history.

JK: And maybe that's good. It's important for a person who wants to find out about animals to actually go out and watch. It's like trying to define a human being. Every one is different.

WOW: What do you hope people get from your [website](#)?

JK: I think it's very important for them to realize we have these animals among us. You don't have to go to a zoo or on a safari, just your backyard. You do have to look and put in a little bit of effort, respect them and protect them in whatever way you can. Don't ever feed wildlife. Don't tame it. Learn their behaviors so you know how to deal with it. Isn't that our job? We know the rules of traffic and we protect ourselves in that way. We need to do the same with these wild animals because they are not going to hurt you if you leave them alone.

Everyone should know that if they see or hear an injured animal, they need to call animal care and control. Animals who are injured do behave differently.

Tags: [janet kessler](#), [parks](#), [photography](#), [San Francisco](#), [urban wildlife](#), [viewing urban wildlife](#)

One Response to *It's a good time of year to spot urban wildlife*

1. ["It's A Good Time Of Year To Spot Urban Wildlife" by Victoria Schlesinger « Coyote Yipps](#) on 06/06/2011 at 7:59 pm

[...] Victoria Schlesinger is one of the founders of Way Out West News, or WOW. This journal, which covers the environmental news in the Bay Area, is a fairly recent creation which is growing by leaps and bounds. Victoria contacted me about wildlife and my wildlife photography. Please check out the journal, and while you are at it, check out her article and slide show based on our interview: <http://www.wayoutwestnews.com/2011/06/06/its-a-good-time-of-year-to-spot-urban-wildlife/> [...]

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