

Animals losing fear, changing nature as big predators become scarce

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This raccoon is not afraid of predators — and that's a bad thing, says scientist Justin Suraci. Because the largest predators are dying out and no longer a threat, smaller animals feel more secure and nature is thrown off-balance. Photo: Michael Clinchy

Some large animals hunt other animals. They are known as apex predators. Wolves and tigers are both apex predators.

Apex predators are important.

For example, wolves hunt elk. Elk are like large deer. By killing some elk, wolves keep elk herds from getting too large.

When there are too many elk, it causes problems. Trees cannot grow well because elk prevent them from taking root. Soon, birds have nowhere to live. One problem leads to another. The apex predators keep everything working.

Scientist Justin Suraci thinks apex predators are important for several reasons. It is not just that they kill other animals. It is also important that other animals are afraid of them.

Too Much Time To Eat

Suraci says other animals spend much of their time worrying about apex predators. They hide and run. They carefully look and listen.

Fearful animals spend less time eating. More of the animals they eat then stay alive.

Suraci says all that is changing. Apex predators are quickly disappearing. Smaller animals are no longer afraid. They are eating more of the even smaller animals they hunt. The change is leading to big problems.

Suraci decided to test his ideas. His plan was to go to a place with no apex predators. Then, he would try to bring fear back. He wanted to see what might change.

A Beach Experiment

Suraci traveled to the Gulf Islands in British Columbia, Canada. He decided to study the raccoons living there.

The raccoons were once hunted by big cats and bears. Now those predators are all gone. They were killed by people.

The raccoons have gotten bold. They wander the beach looking for fish and crab. They are no longer scared.

Raccoons end up eating more fish and crabs. The fish and crabs may start disappearing.

Putting Fear Back Into Raccoons

Suraci wanted to make the raccoons fearful again. He set up speakers near the shore. The speakers played the sounds of dogs barking.

The raccoons started to act differently. They came out in the open less. They checked for danger more. Because of that, they had much less time to hunt for fish and crab.

Soon there were more fish and crab around.

Of course, recordings of barking dogs would not work for long. The raccoons would realize the danger was not real.

Suraci says we must bring apex predators back. It is the only way to make things right again.