



UNSEEN NATURE

A flock of pigeons swirls around you on Dam Square. Large herring gulls squawk over your head, and a family of rats is happily chewing on a discarded ice cone in the bushes. A bold starling nearly mistakes your toe for the spilled crumbs he's collecting on the platform of Amsterdam Central Station. Blue herons wait patiently on the roofs surrounding the fish market, knowing there will be rich pickings at the end of the day. In the canals, coots show their creativity as they turn rubbish into fantastic nests. Bees buzz busily around the holly roses in front of a house. If you're really eagle-eyed, you may see a peregrine falcon carrying a pigeon in its talons back to its nest of hungry young. And rose-ringed parakeets add yet more colour to Amsterdam... But we often pass by these inhabitants of our cities, without so much as a glance.

As photographers, we are accustomed to carefully observing the world, but when we started the Amsterdam Urban Jungle project two years ago, we soon realised that a whole new world was opening up for us as well. We were helped by the expertise and scouting of the film team led by director Mark Verkerk, and by many other consultants and experts in urban nature. The publications written by urban ecologists Remco Daalder and Geert Timmermans were another important source of useful information.

This project really was an eye-opener for us. It has changed the way we see our urban environment. Before, we barely noticed all the nature around us, but now we see urban wildlife everywhere. When photographing the herons in the Albert Cuyp market, we immediately heard the sound of common swifts, nestling further down the road in the Oranjekerk church.

Learning about nature is an enriching experience, and you don't have to go on a safari in a faraway country – in fact, you don't even have to leave the city. Both the film and book Amsterdam Urban Jungle will help you discover and enjoy the remarkable reality of ordinary nature, right in the city of Amsterdam.

Hopefully, the film and this book will help this hidden world become more visible.

We wish you lots of happy viewing and reading!

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The numbers of red American crayfish in Amsterdam have been on the rise for some decades now. This freshwater lobster is often seen in the eastern part of the city. It moves to different canals and bays via streets and dykes, especially during wet weather.

Following pages: city coots reuse all kinds of materials for their nests. They tend to recycle a lot of plastic, and some coot pairs have a clear preference for gaudy colourful home decoration.



AMSTERDAM NATURE RESERVE



More than thirty species of mammal are found in the city of Amsterdam, along with one hundred and fifty species of birds. These are actual breeding birds; not the ones that just fly past, but nest builders, egg layers, chick rearers. Sixty species of fish swim in the city's waters.

Experts have found eleven hundred types of mushrooms in the city and the immediate area. Foxes penetrate deep into the city, sometimes into the heart of the Jordaan neighbourhood. Stoats roam the city's edges, grass snakes control the Diemerzeedijk, goshawks and sparrowhawks hunt pigeons and blackbirds in the city parks, dwarf bats chase mosquitoes on Dam square. Lots of species have made the city their favourite habitat. There are also a number of very rare species, some which are so threatened in the Netherlands that they are on the red list. That does not mean that they are safe or that they enjoy extra legal protection, by the way. It only means that these species are listed on a bit of paper somewhere, and that bureaucrats are constantly wailing over their sad fate. Those hundreds and thousands of plants and animals have good reasons to live in the city, and here are what I consider the three most important.

One: Amsterdam's residents are kind to animals. In the countryside, a farmer might happen to shoot the odd crow, fox or a bird of prey. The lives of hares, ducks and pigeons are even more uncertain, hunted as they are. Lapwings' eggs are often stolen by egg collectors. On top of all this, there is the frequent muck-spreading, grass mowing, and brutal ditch clearing to contend with. In a city park, it's all nice and quiet, and you are safe from all that misery. There might be a lot of people around, but they are only interested in each other or, even better, come to scatter some bread. They do not suddenly appear with a shotgun, or cut down the tree you are nesting in, and animals are quick to realise this. The ducks who eat bread from the hands of passers-by are much more timid in the pastures around the city just a few miles away,

and will fly away in panic if you come within 50 yards. These are the same duck species, and perhaps even the same ducks, because ducks found in the park regularly fly to the city edges to complement their monotonous menu of bread with grass. They know they have nothing to fear from people in the city, but it's different in the countryside.

Two: The city is a patchwork made up of lots of different small areas. In the countryside of the Veluwe, on the other hand, there are woods, woods, and more woods, full of animals which love woods. The Amsterdam Bos in Amsterdam is indeed a mature wood with woodland creatures, but there are also parks, meadows, marshes with reeds and willows, and sandy areas. There are areas of water with fresh water and brackish water, steep quays and gently-sloping shores, there are canals, moats and ponds in all sorts and sizes. And on top of that, there are the houses. Animals use our homes as if they were artificial mountains. Common swifts and sparrows breed under roof tiles, bats hide in church spires and cavity walls, and mountain birds such as the black redstart love our roof landscape. None of these animals have a place in the wooded Veluwe region.

Each city landscape has its own plants and animals. Ferns grow out of the walls lining steep quays, while reeds need sloping banks. Perch and bream like fresh water, while the brackish water of the IJ River is home to whiting, herring, shrimps and shore crabs. A wide range of landscapes offers opportunities for a wide range of plants and animals. It all adds up to those impressive numbers that we started with: the dozens of mammals and 150 species of nesting birds. Three: The city is one big cafeteria, and a warm and convenient one at that. All the brickwork

keeps temperatures in the city a few degrees higher than in the countryside, which is especially important in winter. For many animals, a severe winter is disastrous. Water freezes over, the frozen ground is covered by snow, and food becomes unreachable. Those few extra degrees of warmth in the city can mean the difference between life and death. Biting winds are held back by the buildings, overhanging roof ridges provide protection against rain and hail. This way, the city provides animals with a pleasant climate in general.

And there is more than enough food, thanks to us humans who spill it all day long. Grain and animal feed are spilt in stables and petting zoos, the Damrak is covered with bits of uneaten hamburger and discarded potato chips. If you're an animal that doesn't particularly like chips, then a chip-loving duck or rat might make a good meal for you instead, and so everyone's happy.

Friendly people, a variety of landscapes, a pleasant climate; these are three good reasons for animals to feel at home in the city, and to find their own niche. Is a city park a good place to live? Or perhaps you prefer the scruffy brambles alongside the railway tracks? Maybe a few bricks are all you need to make a home, or are you swept away by the beautiful viewpoints from the city's mountainous rooftops?

Either way, what's so great about urban animals is that they live their lives right alongside us, and that we can study their lives from a table at the cafe window. No need to climb mountains or suffer intense heat, but just sit back, enjoy a beer or a coffee, and learn as much about animals from your seat as you would in the wildest and most inaccessible natural areas. And at least you'll never go thirsty in the Amsterdam nature reserve.



THE CITY AS ONE BIG CAFETERIA



Not only is food abundant in the city, but the menu is very varied! Birds in particular, such as seagulls, pigeons and starlings, are real opportunists. They will eat anything that people leave behind, be it bread, chips, or ice-cream cones.









THE CONQUEST OF AMSTERDAM

The most popular bird in Amsterdam is an immigrant. The rose-ringed parakeet, originally found in Asia and Africa, has been living wild in Amsterdam since 1976, where it quickly became very popular and was given the pet name 'parrot'. People like these birds because they are very attractive and easy to feed, which gives lots of people an additional pleasant pastime. With its bright green feathers and swift flight, the rose-ringed parakeet is a welcome addition to the traditional but somewhat colourless sparrows and starlings we know so well.

Those first rose-ringed parakeets were released from their cage by an owner who could no longer stand their screeching. They nested in the Vondelpark, raised chicks, were later joined by some other released parakeets, and the population began to grow.

It didn't take long for them to conquer Amsterdam. Victory began in Vondelpark, where several pairs of parakeets made their home in tree holes and raised their young. Then they moved on to Beatrixpark, before taking over Rembrandtpark. It took until 1990 for the parakeets to venture beyond the urban perimeter of Amsterdam, when they were first sighted in Amstelveen. They then spread to Amsterdam North and to Weesp in 1998. The parakeets obviously prefer urban environments, and are not so keen on the countryside.

This is also apparent from the places they choose to spend the night. Rose-ringed parakeets roost in big flocks in high trees, often in

places where the noise continues throughout the night. For example, they can be found next to the Utrechtsebrug, or on the corner of Oosterpark. The parakeets roosting next to Sloterpark don't even seem bothered by the traditional New Year's barrage of fireworks.

Since they roost together, Amsterdam bird watchers were able to count their numbers quite accurately. They found that the population has grown by more than twenty percent each year since 1994. The exact number flying around in Amsterdam is under discussion; estimates vary between 3,000 and 5,000, so let's assume 4,000. The growth of the population has now stalled, which is a phenomenon often seen with exotic newcomers. First comes an explosive growth, followed by stabilisation, and sometimes numbers even dwindle. This is because both raptors and parasites have discovered the species as a source of food. However, things are looking good for the rose-ringed parakeet, which has no problem with cold winters. Birds that eat

seeds and nuts can always find food in the city. However, a lack of habitat could pose a problem in the future, as they like to nest in holes in old dilapidated trees – which are a rarity in Amsterdam. As a result, they are increasingly dependent on the great spotted woodpecker, an experienced hole maker who doesn't mind drilling an extra hole or two, but won't carry on forever. The parakeets also face problems with urban goshawks and peregrine falcons, although that doesn't really affect total numbers. So they will continue to brighten up the cityscape with their colours and their calls. They have indeed won their place.

The rose-ringed parakeet doesn't bother camouflaging itself; its bright green plumage stands out immediately, except in a tree with young green leaves, and its call can be heard all around. Incidentally, the females do not have a ring.

Previous pages: a pair of rose-ringed parakeets fly to and fro to feed their young in the nest.



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A FOX IN THE JORDAAN?

From a distance a fox resembles a dog, but a fox that climbs effortlessly over a metres-high fence right in front of your nose only to disappear into the night, is more reminiscent of a cat.

A fox is a member of the dog family, and it can bark. Usually foxes bark softly, but they can also bark loudly, with a high pitch, usually four times in succession. Once you get to know that sound, you realise that there are more foxes in the vicinity than you first thought.

Foxes are at their most beautiful in winter, with their magnificent thick, red-brown winter coats. In the summer they have a slimmer look. Fox tracks on snow or freshly-tilled soil are easy to recognise, because the trail looks like a drunkard's swagger, looping from one ditch to another and from bush to tree and back again. Faeces, which are 8 to 10 cm long, are easily distinguished from cat and dog faeces by the helical tip and odour.

Males are bigger and heavier than females. The heaviest fox found in Amsterdam to date was a 7.5 kg animal found in 2013. Their acute hearing means they can pinpoint the location of a mouse from the tiniest scratching. Their excellent sense of smell also helps them find food and catch prey. They are creatures that mainly hunt at night when their prey, such as mice and rabbits, are active. In cities, foxes do useful work by controlling rabbit populations, which can be very high.

There were no foxes in North Holland, let alone in Amsterdam, until the 1950s. The population now living here is composed of two groups. One group travelled here from the Gooi area inland,

while the other group came to the city from the dunes, where foxes returned in 1968. Sometimes, foxes penetrate deep into the city. In 2014, one was run over alongside the Amstel River near the Kleine Komedie theatre hall, and in 2016 live foxes were found on the Marnixkade and in the Jordaan district. In 2017, a fox was spotted on Lindengracht. These urban foxes are usually seen by passers-by or residents, who then call the animal ambulance to transport the animals back to the city perimeter. The fox who lives in the Vondelpark is left in peace. During the day, this fox hides on the Koeienweide, before appearing in the evening to look for food in the park and gardens of nearby villas.







A young rose-ringed parakeet.

Left: a young red squirrel. Ill, injured, young and orphaned animals can rely on help in the city; the animal ambulance will pick them up and bring them to a suitable rescue centre, such as De Toelucht in Bijlmermeer. This foundation has been rescuing birds since 1989, but now also helps hedgehogs and other mammals. The foundation takes in around 4,000 birds and 400 rescue hedgehogs per year. About 65 percent of the animals can return to their natural habitat after care or recovery.





NON-POISONOUS, AND PRIMAL

The grass snake is harmless to humans. It's not poisonous, it doesn't try and strangle you, and if you pick one up all it does is hiss a bit and then play dead... and defecate.

So what makes the creature so popular? Not because of these habits, for sure. Everywhere where grass snakes are found in the Netherlands, people eagerly build places for them to lay their eggs. The grass snake lays its eggs in piles of rotting vegetation, which maintains a constant temperature of 37 degrees, ideal for hatching eggs. Piles of rotting material can still be found in the Netherlands; at garden centres sometimes, or in allotments where old-fashioned compost piles are still used. However, environmental legislation and picky neighbours have generally put an end to leaving piles of dead plant residue and manure look after itself. That is why volunteers gather together plant material, horse manure and straw to create the ideal habitat for snakes to lay their eggs in, according to an expert formula.

This work is being carried out in Amsterdam at the Amstelveense Poel, on the Diemer Vijfhoek, in Diemerpark and in Waterland, and the snakes

are very grateful. Hundreds of eggs can be laid in a single incubator pile. Thanks to the volunteer nature conservationists and these piles, grass snakes are still found in these places. They are completely dependent on our goodwill, though.

The question remains why we are so concerned for this reptile. It doesn't sing, it's difficult to see, it eats frogs, and it defecates if you pick it up, so it can't be any of those things. Perhaps it's a primal sense of sympathy for this primitive, timid and extremely vulnerable animal, which nevertheless manages to survive in our highly-industrialised environment littered with motorway infrastructures. The fact that the grass snake is still around means that there is still nature after all. And that we humans aren't doing so badly after all. It is proof that we still live surrounded by nature, so it has a symbolic function. Having that function can really help an animal survive – the grass snakes in Amsterdam prove it.

Look for snakes on a beautiful April day when they have just awoken from their winter hibernation to warm up in the sun. The best chance of seeing one is on the Diemerzeedijk.

The grass snake is one of Amsterdam's 'big five', together with the fox, seal, common kingfisher and common swift. There are at least several hundred in the city, especially on the eastern side along the shores of IJsselmeer. They are easiest to spot on a sunny day in the spring and autumn, in a place such as Diemer Park or along the Uitdammerdijk. The rest of the year, grass snakes keep warm in small hollows beneath the ground.

The grass snake is not poisonous, and is sometimes called the ringed snake because of the yellow ring behind its head. Females can reach 1.30 m in length, while males tend to only reach 90 cm. Volunteers create piles of vegetation where grass snakes can lay their eggs.

Previous pages: young grass snakes are only 20 cm long.



