

To Fence or Not to Fence, That is the Question

By Kathleen Jermstad

It seems like everybody I know planted a Covid garden last year. And they can tell you, tending gardens can present various challenges. The biggest challenge is that browsers show up to eat the fruit of gardeners' labor. If the challenges don't come from the air, they come from underground or jump over the barriers we construct.

Our foothills teem with a diversity of wildlife. Nature and wildlife are often the main reason we have been attracted to this area. We love the deer and rabbits — until we start a garden! But give this some thought: our many wild species here have no choice except to share the landscape with us, a landscape that was once exclusively theirs. Like animals, we humans are territorial, but because we have opposing thumbs and a higher ability to learn and solve problems, we tend to mark our boundaries with physical barriers instead of scents.

There are various reasons why we build these barriers. For protection of gardens, a homeowner wants to keep animals *out*, while another homeowner may be focused on keeping livestock, children and pets *in*.

Sometimes, a fence is installed for marking property boundaries, a safeguard against real estate disputes, in which case a short fence will suffice. Sometimes, fences are erected because homeowners feel more secure with fencing around their home, safety being the objective. While it may be true that “good fences make for good neighbors,” it can also be true that “fences only keep honest people out.”

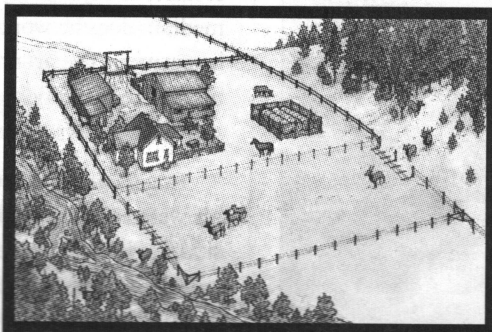
Impenetrable fences that keep wildlife out, however, can have harmful effects on them. They bar animals from necessary

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resources such as food and water, and present a hardship on them especially during long, hot and dry summers. Less evident to homeowners is how fencing dices up the landscape into small patches,

reducing the habitat linkages necessary for wildlife to mate, migrate and disperse the young.



Fencing Strategies

Depending on the objective

for installing fencing, there are myriad strategies to consider. Typical 4-6 foot barbed-wire fencing can pose a physical danger to deer. If the objective is to keep deer out, then a 7-8 foot wire grid fence is the best practice. If wire strands are used to top a fence, the space between the top 2 strands should be a minimum of 10 inches, but a 12-inch space is preferred.

This top space is very important to deer because of the manner in which they jump fences. Whitetails and mule deer draw their legs under their bodies as they leap a

fence. If one or both hind legs fail to clear the top wire, the leg(s) may catch between the top two wires as the rest of the deer continues over the fence. The wires twist tightly, entangling the lower portion of the leg or legs, resulting in serious injury and often death,” points out the Wyoming Fish & Game Department on its website.

Another fencing best-practice is to make the wires of a fence visible to birds and bats by flagging the top wire or running the wire through white PVC pipe. Fence posts should also be capped to prevent birds from building nests on top so they don't fall and get trapped at the bottom. These are just a few tips on how to be a good neighbor to the wildlife we cherish.

As you drive the numerous back roads in our county, you'll see roadside fencing that is old and dilapidated. Historically, this is fencing that served ranchers for keeping in cattle, sheep or horses. These loose wires can easily snare a deer as they attempt to jump it. A simple best-practice in this situation is to tie loose wires together or remove them altogether. In these old fences, many sections are broken down allowing animals to freely navigate the landscape.

So, are installing impenetrable fences really necessary? If so, what are the options? To research the best kinds of fencing to install for different needs, check out “*A Landowners Guide to Fences and Wildlife.*” There are ample online resources as well, including links to guidelines by some of our western states at www.landscapeconnectivity.org. A valuable resource about sharing habitat with wildlife can be found at the website of the California Department of Wildlife: wildlife.ca.gov/living-with-wildlife.

Kathleen Jermstad has lived in El Dorado County since 1973. She is a retired biologist from the research branch of the USDA Forest Service and UC Davis, and now serves El Dorado County District III on the Fish and Wildlife Commission. Her background includes genetic research of conifers and wildlife conservation. Reach her at www.naturalbornferret.com