

# Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

## ***Urban Jungle: The History and Future of Nature in the City***

By Ben Wilson

*Urban Jungle: The History and Future of Nature in the City* is 241 pages, not including an introduction, notes, acknowledgements and index. It has seven chapters and an epilogue. *Urban Jungle* was published in 2023.

Ben Wilson is a British historian who has written six previous books including a well-regarded history of cities titled *Metropolis: A History of Humankind's Greatest Achievement*.

This is a book about things we usually see as mutually exclusive, nature and cities. They aren't as separate as we think, Wilson writes. In fact, cities teem with plants, insects and wildlife. And for the sake of cities, he says, we need them to teem with more.

That's for two reasons. First, plants in particular make urban life more tolerable. Trees make streets and sidewalks cooler, plants help with stormwater runoff, and natural areas help people find emotional balance. Second, climate change will make these things far more important, as we enter a world that is hotter and more prone to droughts that alternate with torrential storms.

Cities that work against these changes by introducing bits of nature on rooftops, in rain gardens, in vacant lots or along boulevards will fare better in a harsher environment, Wilson writes. And it may not take long for these bits to take hold.

To explain how nature works in cities today, why plants and wildlife have such an important but largely unseen presence, and how the natural realm could be expanded, Wilson takes us on a world tour. We are introduced to the boars that roam through Berlin's parks, the coyotes that make St. Paul, Minn. their home, and a backyard garden in England whose owner, a zoologist at the University of Leicester, made a startling discovery in the 1970s.

The discovery: This modest garden (less than two-tenths of an acre in size) contained 2,673 species, including 474 plants, 1,977 insects, 138 other invertebrates and 64 vertebrates. This was more wildlife,



**Urban  
Jungle**

The History  
and Future  
of Nature in  
the City

**BEN WILSON**  
Author of METROPOLIS



the zoologist calculated, than in a similar sized area of a nearby forest. And it pointed out something important about urban places, Wilson writes. “Urban gardens support a greater number of species than an equivalent-sized semi-wild rural habitat.”

Why? Because farming creates monocultures, both within the farm as well as in nearby forests. Cities create highly diverse ecosystems, mostly thanks to all those plants in backyards and balcony flower boxes, many of which are not native to the region.

In the main, Wilson says, insects, birds and animals benefit from this diversity and can thrive in it under the right conditions. And not just thrive but change. The suburban coyotes in America and the urban foxes in Britain are increasingly different from their county cousins, less aggressive and more monogamous. And the foxes are even changing in physical and behavioral ways, he writes, “developing shorter, wider snouts and smaller heads; and they are becoming bolder and smarter.”

In short, then, there’s much more plant life and animal life going on in cities today than most of us realize. And we should welcome this presence—and seek every way of expanding it. “Cities badly need re-naturalized rivers, restored wetlands, rehabilitated tidal marshes and the shady canopies of urban forests to withstand the climate crisis,” Wilson writes. “If you picture the city of the future, think less of smart tech, flying cars and skyscrapers; think more of cascading foliage, farms on flat roofs, rough urban meadows and dense groves of forest.”

Does this mean tearing down buildings to plant forests? No. There are, Wilson writes, lots of “unused and underutilized space” between buildings or atop buildings in the most urban parts of cities. In the suburbs there are back yards that can make up a quarter of a city’s area. “The space we *could* make for nature is vast,” he adds.

What isn’t helpful, he adds, are lawns. “Turf grasses,” he says, “are some of the most destructive invasive species assailing the planet.” Worse, they are drenched in fertilizer and pesticides, which harm insects and birds. And rather than helping with climate change, they may be a detriment. In Florida, he notes, half of all public water ends up on lawns. In some western states, it can be up to 70 percent.

Nor is Wilson a fan of parks with large lawns for the same reasons: too much maintenance, too little benefit to wildlife. Much better, he says, are forests. He has an example: the Great Trinity Forest, the largest urban forest in the U.S., a 6,000-acre woodland through the middle of Dallas. How did all this land escape development? It is in the flood plain of the Trinity River, and frequent floods in the 19th and 20th centuries wiped away whatever was built there. At a point in the 20th century, the city gave up and let the river and its sprawling floodplain return to nature.

And it has done so in remarkable ways. Today, the Great Trinity Forest “supports a teeming forest-floor ecosystem,” right in the middle of Dallas, with white-tailed deer, coyotes, feral hogs, turtles, toads, beavers, otters and even alligators. This is not a managed forest and it’s certainly not a park. It’s a neglected area, as wild as the most remote parts of America. It just happens to be in the middle of a big city.

This is one of the themes of *Urban Jungle*: If we allow it, Wilson says, urban places can return to nature with surprising speed.

We know this because of what happened in bombed-out cities in Europe and Asia after World War II. Biologists and botanists were struck by how quickly trees and shrubs sprouted in bomb craters. Even in Hiroshima, Japan where the atomic bomb was expected to wipe out all traces of plant life for a 75-year period, nature came back quickly. “Within months,” he writes, “a patch of oleanders flowered on the irradiated land. Ancient camphor trees, resembling burnt sticks of charcoal, began to sprout buds in defiance of their apparent death.”

And not just came back, but did so with greater diversity than before the war. That's because, Wilson says, "disturbance favors biodiversity. In the years after a natural or human made disaster, the number of species increases rapidly as plants and insects compete to colonize the barren earth and rubble." Eventually, the diversity lessens as large trees and predators dominate, but it is almost always the case that there is a greater variety of plants and wildlife after a disturbance than before.

This is also the case in places that are recently developed. Wilson points to photographs of suburban Los Angeles in the 1950s, when mile after mile of orange groves were plowed under to create tract housing. In these pictures, you see few trees or other plants, just concrete and brown dirt. "It looks like the very definition of ecocide," he says, "but this was a landscape also poised on the brink of renewal. Within years, such landscapes would develop a canopy and a covering of exotic plants."

How diverse is this post-development environment today? A 2019 study of one area of Los Angeles found 563 species of trees in residential yards. In natural areas nearby, there were just four tree species.

Looking forward, Wilson has four recommendations. First, he says, cities should encourage greenery in every nook and cranny, from rooftops to spaces between buildings. Second, they should allow the open spaces we have today, such as parks and floodplains, to be more natural. In other words, more like the Great Trinity Forest and less like a typical city park. Third, we should be creative in our use of nature. He points to rain gardens and "cloudburst boulevards," such as the ones Copenhagen, Denmark is building that can divert and absorb large amounts of water. Finally, we should daylight as many streams as possible.

That's partly to help with coming torrential rain. (Not surprisingly, open streams handle stormwater far more effectively than sewers and culverts.) But it's also because stream banks can support abundant plant life that make cities cooler and more livable.

Wilson points to the world's most famous daylighted stream, the Cheonggyecheon, which runs through downtown Seoul, Korea. In the 1950s, this stream was buried beneath a six-lane expressway. In 2005, the highway was torn down and the stream restored. Result: It is an urban jewel, a five-mile ribbon of blue and green that is visited by 60,000 people a day.

But it's not just beautiful to look at; it also cools the area around it. Alongside the Cheonggyecheon, Wilson says, temperatures are up to 10 degrees cooler than elsewhere in the city and air pollution is significantly reduced. And more: The daylighted stream has "become a haven of urban biodiversity: Plant species increased from 62 to 308 after completion, fish from four to 25, birds from six to 36 and aquatic invertebrates from five to 35."

In our discussion, the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group will focus on what this book about nature in cities should tell Urban Atlanta about becoming more livable today and better positioned for climate change.

Footnote: The book mentions Atlanta, where trees form a canopy over nearly half of the city's landmass. Atlanta, it notes, is America's "city in the forest."

**When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we will discuss Ben Wilson’s book about how cities teem with nature today and why they should seek more places for plants and wildlife.**

Our meeting will be **May 6, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307.**

There’s more information about this discussion at the [Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website](#).

### **Preparing for the discussion**

Here are some questions we’ll consider in our discussion:

1. What are “big ideas” in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta? Are there assets that would help with their adoption?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles, using our assets?

How to get your copy of *Urban Jungle*:

- You can purchase a copy from a local bookstore like [Virginia Highland Books](#).
- You can download an e-book edition from the Barnes & Noble, Apple or Amazon websites.
- You can borrow a copy from the [DeKalb County Public Library](#).