

## Rules for Living at the Urban-Wildland Interface

*“The Urban-Wildland Interface Area is that geographical area where structures and other human developments meet or intermingle with wildland or vegetative fuels.” 2000 Urban Wildland Interface Code, International Fire Code Institute, Whittier, California*

Rule #1: We’re not supposed to live here.

My house is surrounded by Gambel oak, sagebrush, rabbitbrush, and big-toothed maple. The trees are small, and the dozen or so houses visible from my deck tend to stick out of the miniature forest like pieces in an out-of-scale diorama. The high-dollar views look across the canyon at the north slopes of 8,000-foot mountains forested with spruce and fir, draped white with snow in the winter. To the west, the canyon mouth forms a V-shaped notch that fills at night with the dense unbelievable lights of the city. Airliners traverse the notch in slow motion on their way to and from the airport. In the mornings, when the sun clears the mountains, it illuminates the mile-high overburden pile from the world’s largest open-pit mine, all the way across the valley on the far side of the city. At this distance, the pile looks like a natural geological feature.

I came here, I imagine, for the same reason my neighbors did. Instead of indulging in cable TV nature shows, an aquarium in an apartment, a cage of finches in the living room, or a little flower garden in the back yard, I would set myself down in the midst of nature. Glorious nature is what I see through the windows of my hermetically-sealed house, wherein I reside comfortable in all weathers, cooking with gas. In the car, it’s twenty-two minutes to downtown.

Here at the interface, mountain lions come to eat our dogs, and our housecats kill chipmunks and songbirds until they are eaten in turn by coyotes. We have urban amenities in a bucolic setting. We drive everywhere we go. We build our homes in the path of inevitable wildland fires and then expect firefighters to risk their lives to protect our property. We drill wells to water lawns of Kentucky bluegrass in a desert climate. We are subsidized by hierarchical social structures and massive inputs of power and technology without which it wouldn’t be comfortable or convenient to live here at all. In the old days, nobody would have lived on the side of a mountain like this. My house is exposed to the weather, there’s no reliable source of surface water, there are no building

materials at hand, the ground's not level, and there's no tillable soil where I might grow some food. We'd do well to remember that come the first significant disruption in the industrial complex we'll all be coasting down to the city in our empty SUVs with our hands out, looking for a place to stay.

Rule #2: Do not play with matches.

This scrub oak forest historically had been swept by fire every fifteen years, on average, but the fires have been suppressed ever since the houses were built. The last big fire was eighteen years ago, and people are nervous. Dead wood has accumulated, and everything is dry after years of drought. We all meet once a year on "Fire Day" and listen to the firefighters describe how to reduce the fuel load in the forest around the neighborhood, how to create defensible spaces around our homes. A real firestorm would incinerate us and our homes in minutes, reduced fuel load notwithstanding, but after Fire Day, people hire workers to thin their forest. I get out my chain saw and do it myself. The work is hard and hot and dirty, but it is good to feel busy. I am doing my part for civilization, chopping down trees, dragging them to the chipper.

Rule #3: Do not talk to the animals.

I have an office in the basement, and my hours are flexible, providing rather too much opportunity to sit alone outdoors on the deck, and stare, and think. I try not to become too isolated. I listen to the radio. Today I watch the big airplanes cross the notch of the canyon mouth one after another after another. A brown haze hangs over the city, obscuring the copper mine beyond. The slopes of the mountains in the middle distance are gradually losing their green as the skies refuse to rain. The oak leaves at the edge of the yard tremble in a hot canyon breeze. One day last month I was staring into those trees and something moving caught my eye. I walked in and found two slender, greenish snakes—racers, I think—in the branches of an oak tree. They were twisted and twined together, rubbing their whole bodies against each other. "What are you doing?" I asked. They stopped and looked at me. I looked at them. Their forked tongues flicked out and in. I backed away. "Sorry," I said. "Carry on." Afterward, I went inside and stared at my face in the bathroom mirror.

Rule #4: Do not live alone.

Once a week I shower and drive to the city. I stalk the supermarket for milk, oatmeal, toilet paper. I think that the women talking into their cell-phone headsets are trying to strike up strange conversations with me. I don't know what to say. My heart trips and skitters.

Rule #5: Do not mess with road kill.

Not everyone seems to appreciate the wildlife here. Moose wander through the neighborhood like stray horses during snowstorms, and some people slow their vehicles and gawk. Others are in a hurry, and they are tired of seeing moose, and they honk and race their engines, accelerating as soon as the moose are out of the way.

It's late August now, and a gang of fifty magpies have descended on the neighborhood, adults and juveniles newly-fledged. They call back and forth with raucous sarcasm, swarming one house and then another as if they are surprised to find us here, these big boxes we live in, our green grass yards. They swoop at house pets and steal food from their bowls and walk around on our rooftops until, overcome with corvid ennui, they filter upcanyon into the wild. Sometimes the juvenile magpies just out of the nest are killed on the road by people who drive too fast. I stop when I see the broken birds on the pavement. I lift them by their strong horny feet, bright pied black and white wings stiff, askew. Apologizing for my neighbors' thoughtlessness, I carry the dead magpies into the trees, wedge them in the crotches of small branches. I have no idea why I do this. More recently, I have begun to rage at fast drivers, swerving into their lane, shaking my fist and making physical threats. I'm big and ugly and people in this neighborhood aren't used to having to deal with people like me. Yesterday, a man in a suit driving a Lexus threatened to call the county sheriff. I'm going to have to learn to control myself.

Rule #6: Do not lay idle.

You're supposed to have a job, put on a suit, and drive your SUV down to the city. When you're out here on the weekend, for Pete's sake look busy! Build something,

or find something to chop down.

Because if you're not careful, if you hold still for too long, a funny kind of angst can sneak up on you at the interface. I sit on the deck early in the mornings and watch my neighbors' garage doors open, the shiny SUVs spilling out and speeding toward the city. When they are gone my mind wanders and I have trouble getting any work done. Red ants big as raspberries crawl over my bare feet. Black-chinned hummingbirds pass by like spirits in a hurry, trilling, too fast to see. A chocolate-colored red-tail hawk hangs in the wind overhead like a kite. When the neighbor's air conditioning unit switches off I can hear the wind hissing softly in the hawk's wings. I watch through binoculars as he turns his head to look at me; I see him every morning and I am sure he knows my face. He holds himself still, slipping the wind from his wings expertly, standing in the air as surely as I stand on the deck.

I am beginning to blur at the peripheries, as if I might dissolve into the air.

Rule #7: Do not leave your windows open at night.

I quit mowing the lawn a long time ago, and now it has grown up impressively with thistle and goat's beard and six-foot-tall bunchgrass that moves in the wind with a grace that is hard to describe. The neighbors are beginning to wonder about me. I see their pale white faces loom and flash and disappear in the glare of plate glass. I switched off the central AC and now I sleep with all the windows open. Great horned owls and poor-wills and coyotes speak to me at night and their voices seep into my dreams, wild dreams that I can't quite recall in the morning. All day I feel uneasy.

Rule #8: Stay in the yard.

Lately I've been wandering in the canyon behind the house. There are no children from the neighborhood out there, just a few adults on mountain bikes, going fast, and I avoid the trails. I learned on the Internet that the berries I've been eating are serviceberries. The cherries that upset my stomach are chokecherries. In a thick spruce grove way up at the head of the canyon, the light is dim and green and the two great horned owls who hide there during the day aren't afraid of me. I drank the water from the stream until I read about giardia, and now I carry water from home. Instead of an elder to

teach me these things, I have the Internet.

These are the things I have learned on my own: an elk herd up close smells like horses, and when a great horned owl hoots she bends forward and sticks out her tail like a prairie chicken.

What is our cardinal sin here at the interface? The aesthete's complacency behind the plate glass window? A life of picking and choosing, a mandarin existence bereft of awe and empathy? We look at the world and see nothing but distorted shapes of ourselves: it is not just one or another cultural lens through which we view the world, but rather in our cataclysmic neurosis we have all been standing in a room of funhouse mirrors for ten thousand years. I have seen this myself, peeking between my fingers at the urban-wildland interface.

Rule #9: Do not fall in love.

As I write, a spotted towhee perched in an oak nearby is watching me with one wild red eye. The chocolate red-tail is circling overhead again, carrying in his talons the slim attenuated shape of a snake, probably another racer. He circles the house with his snake as if it's something he wants to show me. The snake is still alive, kinking and relaxing its body, hanging down from the hawk like a tail. The hawk screams and circles my house. I'm surprised to find that I'm weeping. I don't think I'm weeping for the snake.

If you fall in love with the world, the world will not love you back, not in any way you expect or desire or understand. If you value your complacency, keep your guard at the urban-wildland interface. Unless you are very sure of your ground, do not sit and stare at the sky laced with contrails, the forest filled with eyes, the invisible wind bending the tall grass. Do not watch the animals watching you. Do not listen. Do not open your heart. And do not fall in love. Do not fall in love. Do not fall in love.