

Good fences make good neighbors



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barbed fences can injure or kill them

By Sandy Beck

Seeing deer, wild turkeys and owls sharing a pasture with livestock is one of the blessings of country living. But every year, large numbers of wild birds and animals are caught on out-dated barbed-wire fences. Such suffering is now preventable.

Above: Staff at the St. Francis Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Tallahassee remove barbed wire from a great horned owl's wing. *Left, top to bottom:* A barred owl was gravely injured when its wing was caught on barbed wire. After two months at a wildlife rehabilitation center, it was released; deer can suffer a terrible death if their legs get tangled in fences; a red-winged blackbird died after being caught on barbed wire.

Long before we began carving up our state into tidy parcels, wildlife traveled freely, from the northern Red Hills to the southern River of Grass, in search of food, water and shelter.

In the early part of the past century, highway construction, the arrival of motorized tourists and a growing population made it necessary for stockowners to fence their pastures. In 1949, after a century of open-range cattle ranching, Florida made it official with the Fence Law. Barbed wire, invented in the 1800s to slice up western grasslands, became the norm across Florida, to keep livestock in and people out.

Today, fences – barbed wire and woven wire – outline a checkerboard of public and private lands; enclose ranches, farms, pastures and gardens; define property boundaries; and run for miles and miles along the interstates, turnpike and other roads that weave through our state.

It appears that the only creature that appreciates a barbed wire fence is the loggerhead shrike. In the absence of thorny bushes, this “butcherbird” uses a barb to restrain small prey.

But for some wild birds and animals, as well as horses, these fences present impenetrable and sometimes deadly barriers.

Wildlife vs. barbed wire

Shortly after dawn on Aug. 8 last year, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission received a call about an injured owl in Gadsden County, north of Tallahassee. The FWC officer called the St. Francis Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. When the officer and wildlife rehabilitator arrived, an elderly woman was holding the owl wrapped in a towel. Unfortunately, a barbed-wire fence was holding it, too.

They cut off an 18-inch section of wire, put the owl in a box and transported it to the wildlife

hospital. St. Francis Wildlife staff removed the wire, cleaned the wound and administered antibiotics. Luckily, the wing was not fractured. That was one feisty bird. It gorged itself on rats and chicks and healed quickly.

Six days later, just before sunset, they drove the owl back home. Without hesitation, it took flight and headed straight for the tallest live oak, this time, steering clear of the fence.

Animals who wrestle with barbed wire fences usually aren't as lucky as this great horned owl.

What kinds of fence cause problems for wildlife?

Recently, researchers at Utah State University completed a study of wildlife mortality along more than 600 miles of fences. They found:

- Woven-wire fence topped with barbed wire was the most lethal fence type. Deer and other animals that try to jump over this type of fence are most likely to tangle a back leg between the top barbed wire and the stiff woven wire or between two top wires that are loose or too close together.

Remedies for existing barbed-wire fences



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High visibility helps wildlife negotiate fences. Cut durable and lightweight fence markers from strips of vinyl siding trim. The trim strip has a lip that easily hooks onto fence wires.

The best choice is for barbed wire not to be used at all, but if that is not an option, simple modifications to existing barbed wire fences can reduce wildlife injuries and deaths.

- Adjust the height of the top wire so that it is no more than 40 to 42 inches high. Replace the top one or two strands and the bottom strand with smooth wire or a wood rail. Leave 12 inches between the top two wires and at least 16 inches, preferably 18 inches, between the bottom and the ground.
- Make barbed wire more visible by adding small sections of white PVC pipe, surveyors tape, plastic flags or metal tags – anything that shimmies in the wind; white is best.
- The Sutton Avian Research Center in Oklahoma, has a technique that uses white, vinyl siding ‘undersill’ or trim strips, available at home improvement stores. They cut the strips into small pieces and hook them onto the barbed wire. It’s lightweight, durable, visible and inexpensive. Audubon volunteers helped one Oklahoma rancher mark one mile of barbed wire in one weekend. Details are at: www.suttoncenter.org/fence_marking.html.
- Conduct daily, early morning inspections of fences.
- Repair loose wires or fallen fences, and remove unneeded fences. Some recycling centers will take old wire.
- Enlist volunteer groups – such as local sportsman’s groups, school groups, scout troops, 4-H, Audubon and Sierra Club – to help with fence projects that help wildlife.



When its wing healed, the great horned owl was returned to the farm where he was found. Without hesitation, he took flight, this time, steering clear of the barbed wire fence.

- Seventy percent of all mortalities were on barbed wire fences higher than 40 inches.
- Woven wire fence that reaches all the way to the ground can orphan a fawn that is unable to follow its mother to the other side.
- Barbed wire placed too close to the ground can snare a fawn, opossum, otter or other small animal and stop it dead in its tracks.

A twisted fate

A bird in flight is likely scanning the distance, not focusing on

close-up objects. Trees are obvious obstacles, but thin strands of a dark barbed-wire fence are not. Nocturnal birds and animals are the most frequent victims.

Owls fly low above the ground, using their sharp hearing to locate rodents hiding in dried leaves or grass. Great horned owls, which hunt in open fields, are impaled on barbed wire more often than other species.

A 1990 paper published in the *Wilson Bulletin*, a respected ornithological journal, documents more than 50 bird species, four bat species and one flying squirrel found entangled

in barbed wire.

Michael L. Avery, project leader with the USDA/APHIS, National Wildlife Research Center's Florida Field Station, wrote in an e-mail, "Injury and death to birds from barbed wire has a long history. At least one whooping crane has been killed in this manner."

Most entanglements go unreported or unnoticed because animals usually die either on the fence or later from injuries or infections or become meals for predators. However, wildlife rehabilitation centers still rescue thousands of wild birds and animals each year that are impaled on or tangled in barbed wire.

In the past five years, Diana Flynt at the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey in Maitland, treated 12 raptors injured by barbed wire, mostly great horned owls and barred owls, but an osprey, a red-shouldered hawk and a Cooper's hawk sustained similar injuries. Only four of those birds could be saved.

When you need to exclude wildlife to prevent property or crop damage

- **Bears:** MyFWC.com/docs/WildlifeHabitats/Electric_Fence.pdf.
MyFWC.com/CONSERVATION/ConservationYou_Living_w_Wildlife_bears.htm.
- **Coyotes:** Woven or welded wire fences at least five feet high; mesh sizes 4 by 6 inches or smaller; an outward overhang of fence wire. Electrifying the fence is an added deterrent.
MyFWC.com/WildlifeHabitats/SpeciesInfo_Coyote.htm.
- **Deer:** MyFWC.com/WildlifeHabitats/SpeciesInfo_Deer.htm.
- **Other species:** MyFWC.com/WildlifeHabitats/SpeciesInfo_index.htm.

David Wrede in Sebring wrote in an e-mail, “In more than 24 years, our center has rescued many owls, deer, great blue herons, sandhill cranes, raccoons, foxes and some small birds from barbed wire fences.”

Anita de Villegas, a rehabilitator in Weirsdale in Marion County also wrote, “In the last seven weeks, I received three barred owls, one great horned owl and a juvenile sandhill crane that were caught in barbed wire.”

Leslie Straub at the Florida Wildlife Care Center in Gainesville also sees fawns, great horned and barred owls, sandhill cranes and otters impaled on barbed wire.

“We’ve also gotten deer that have that had their rear legs caught in old barbed wire at the edge of Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park.” Straub explained while they might dislocate a hip, it’s the stressful, nightlong struggle that most often kills them.

The times are a changin’

Many use barbed wire simply because of tradition, because their grandfather and father used it.

Gramlings Feed & Seed in Tallahassee, a family-owned and operated business since 1915, carries a huge assortment of fencing. Store manager Wayne DeMent said, “These days, we sell one roll of barbed wire every five years. We don’t recommend it anymore. Deer run full-tilt into it and get torn up. What people buy today is welded wire, woven wire or field fence. Barbed wire is suitable for only one thing: keeping people out.

A property owner is also liable for injuries sustained by people or horses from barbed wire. The Florida courts ruled on the side of a trespassing horseback rider that ran into barbed wire fence after dark.

Harmony is a new “green” community in Florida that promotes respect for all life

and the land that sustains it.” The covenants, codes and restrictions, which were reviewed and partially written by Dr. Mark Hostetler, University of Florida Wildlife Extension agent, specifically prohibits the use of barbed wire.

Greg Kaufmann with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s Bureau of Design and Recreation said, “Every type of fence has an inherent risk. Some pose more risk for some wildlife. It’s a kind of balancing act between restricting access to some resources and wildlife.”

Wherever possible, DEP uses the newer woven wire in state parks and patrols its fence lines regularly.

Jim Mills, in the Florida Department of Transportation’s Design Criteria and Standards Office explained the DOT maintains fence along the Florida Turnpike and other major roads to limit access to private land. They also want to ensure that people get on and off these roads only at interchanges.

DOT usually uses either standard chain link or 5-foot-high woven wire fence with two strands of barbed wire on top.

But Mills added, “If we have a standard that is causing an environmental problem, and we can find an economical solution, we will look at making changes.”

These problems are preventable. Hazardous fences can be replaced by more wildlife-friendly fencing, or simple modifications can at least reduce wildlife injuries and deaths.

Hopefully, with the many alternatives to conventional barbed wire, and with environmental organizations, universities and government agencies providing public education and leadership, these fences, so lethal to wildlife, will become a distant, sad memory. **FW**



Wildlife-friendly alternatives to barbed wire

The best fences are very visible and enable wildlife to easily jump over or slip under the wires or rails, with no barbs to impale birds and animals and a design that minimizes tangling.

The University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences has information on “high-tensile wire fencing” which was developed in New Zealand several years ago and is now being used in Florida. It is easier to handle than barbed wire or woven wire, has no barbs to injure animals, and is low-maintenance and less expensive than barbed wire. Details are at: edis.ifas.ufl.edu/AE017.

North Florida Animal Hospital veterinarian Dr. George Simmons has sutured up many horses that ran into barbed wire. While Simmons concedes “any fence is going to be tough on wildlife,” he recommends a fence topped with a wood rail rather than wire. He’s often seen wild turkeys fly up to such a fence, rest on top, look around, then fly off unscathed. The wood top is also kinder to owls, deer and other wildlife.

The ideal wildlife-friendly livestock fence has:

- A top wire or rail preferably no more than 40 to 42 inches above the ground.
- At least 12 inches between the top two wires, to prevent animals jumping the fence from catching a foot between the two.
- At least 16 inches, preferably 18 inches, between the ground and the bottom wire or rail.
- Wood rail or smooth wire for the top and bottom.

