

Some unusual, exotic beasts call state home

BRISTOW MARCHANT

THE STATE

David Jachowski was looking for a completely different animal when he ran into the elusive spotted skunk.

The Clemson University ecology professor and his students were hoping to study the migration patterns of golden eagles, so they put out deer carcasses in South Carolina's Upstate, trying to attract the birds. Instead, their cameras captured another rarely seen creature — the spotted skunk, a shy inhabitant of the Upstate's hills.

"I don't know if they were eating (the carcasses) or just came to investigate the smell," Jachowski said. Spotted skunks were widespread in the Palmetto State before their population dropped off in the middle of the last century for unknown reasons.

"This is a species we don't know much about," Jachowski said. He now heads a two-year study of the critters, which are baited for study with sardines, rather than stags.

The skunk isn't the only rare, unusual or odd creature to pop up occasionally in the state.

In May, someone reported releasing a boa constrictor into Congaree National Park. Park officials never found the tropical snake and are not sure one ever was released.

But other animal-world oddities have been confirmed.

Fishing trips to state lakes have turned up an

omnivorous, freshwater relative of the piranha.

A South American kangaroo-like rodent has made appearances in the Upstate.

The state Department of Natural Resources has been called in when pet turtles from Africa have escaped, having grown to weigh 100 pounds.

And, in 2010, a 6-foot-tall emu — a large, flightless Australian bird — caused a commotion when it got loose in downtown Rock Hill.

'You could bruise a knuckle'

Wildlife officials suspect many of the exotic animals that have been found in the state were released by their owners or escaped captivity.

For example, pacu, a tropical fish related to piranha that sometimes is sold in the pet trade, occasionally have been found in Lake Hartwell.

"I think people keep them for a few years and they outgrow the aquarium, and then they just release them," said Ross Self, Natural Resources' chief of freshwater fisheries, hastening to add it is illegal to let pet fish go in the state's waterways.

The pacu is noteworthy because, like its piranha cousins, it has teeth. Not pointed teeth, but eerily human-looking molars.

"It eats fruits and nuts that fall into the water, so it has crushing teeth," Self said. "It's not an aggressive predator."

But, he added, "If you stick your finger in its

mouth, you could bruise a knuckle."

Self doubts the pacu are reproducing, because the tropical fish probably couldn't survive a South Carolina winter.

'Souped-up jackrabbit'

Another likely escapee from pet-dom was the Patagonian cavy, an animal that Natural Resources officers used to find occasionally in parts of Edgefield County.

More than a decade ago, wildlife agents got reports of a "souped-up looking jackrabbit" in the western parts of the county, said Jay Butfiloski, a DNR wildlife biologist.

Natural Resources officers finally identified the "jackrabbit" as being a cavy — a rabbit-like rodent from Argentina that has long hind legs and long ears — from photos snapped by the public and, on at least one occasion, a dead animal found on the side of the road.

Butfiloski thinks the cavy sightings in Edgefield could be the result of someone in the area keeping the animals. But he said it's been six or seven years since the last cavy was reported to Natural Resources.

'Little tanks'

More frequent are reports of the African spur-thighed tortoise, an animal that gets its name from the spiky scales on its legs. The tortoises are sold as pets but can grow to be much larger than their owners might ex-

pect, often exceeding 100 pounds.

"They're sold when they're about golf ball size, then grow to be like little tanks," said Will Dillman, a Natural Resources herpetologist, a scientist who studies amphibians and reptiles. "People put them in the yard, and they can dig out into the adjacent lot."

The tortoises don't pose a danger to humans and are caught fairly quickly. But Dillman said, "They are surprisingly fast."

Other exotic animals are better suited to life in the wild here. For instance, the Texas horned lizard, a desert dweller, has made a home for itself in the Lowcountry's sandy soil.

Not new here

Not all of South Carolina's stranger creatures have escaped from captivity.

Some are fairly common, but maintain such a low profile that their presence — when confirmed — can cause a commotion.

Butfiloski recently received a photo from Anderson County showing an ermine weasel peeking out of a woodpile.

Weasels are common in South Carolina, but they don't come to the attention of Natural Resources very often — unless they get into a chicken coop.

"They can be quite aggressive to small animals," Butfiloski said. "Sometimes, weasels go on a killing spree."