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# Backyard Wilderness

Leila Armstrong is a Lethbridge-based artist interested in urban wildlife, the nature-culture divide, and art as research. Armstrong has a BA in Fine and Performing Arts from Simon Fraser University and a MA in Media Studies from Concordia University in Montréal. She works both independently and in collaboration with other artists, such as in *12 Point Buck* (2009-2011) and *M.E.D.I.U.M.* (2011-2016). This publication is in partial fulfillment of a PhD in Evolution and Behaviour at the University of Lethbridge where Armstrong has been a member of the Barrett-Henzi lab.



#### Summary continued...

skunks had a positive comment rating of 23%, higher than for mixed (19%), neutral (9%), or negative (9%), so I was curious to know whether or not this would play out similarly in the more robust second survey. It did not. The least popular animals in the second survey were mice, rattlesnakes, and skunks.

Both dog and cat owners reported that their pets had interactions with multiple species, not just skunks (for dogs) and birds and mice (for cats). I wish I had more clearly differentiated between people and their dogs when it came to skunk sprayings. This lack of clarity should be resolved in future queries.

Given the staggering number of deer killed by vehicles on Alberta's highways, I anticipated that the percentage of respondents who had hit or killed deer with their vehicles within city limits would be quite high. It turned out to be 6%. Provincial data suggests over 4,250 deer were killed by vehicles in Alberta each year from 2000 to 2023 (Farrell, 2024).

As expected, hunter/trappers were more likely to report trapping and euthanizing animals (35%) than non-hunter/trappers (8%). This is likely due to their "hands-on" approach to animals and a history of handling dead or injured wildlife.

I was pleasantly surprised that nearly half of respondents (48%) were not afraid that urban wildlife might spread diseases.

Finally, 72% of respondents believed wildlife should be managed within city limits, with the majority supporting relocation (58%) and the connection of green spaces (55%). Providing veterinary services was supported by 45%.

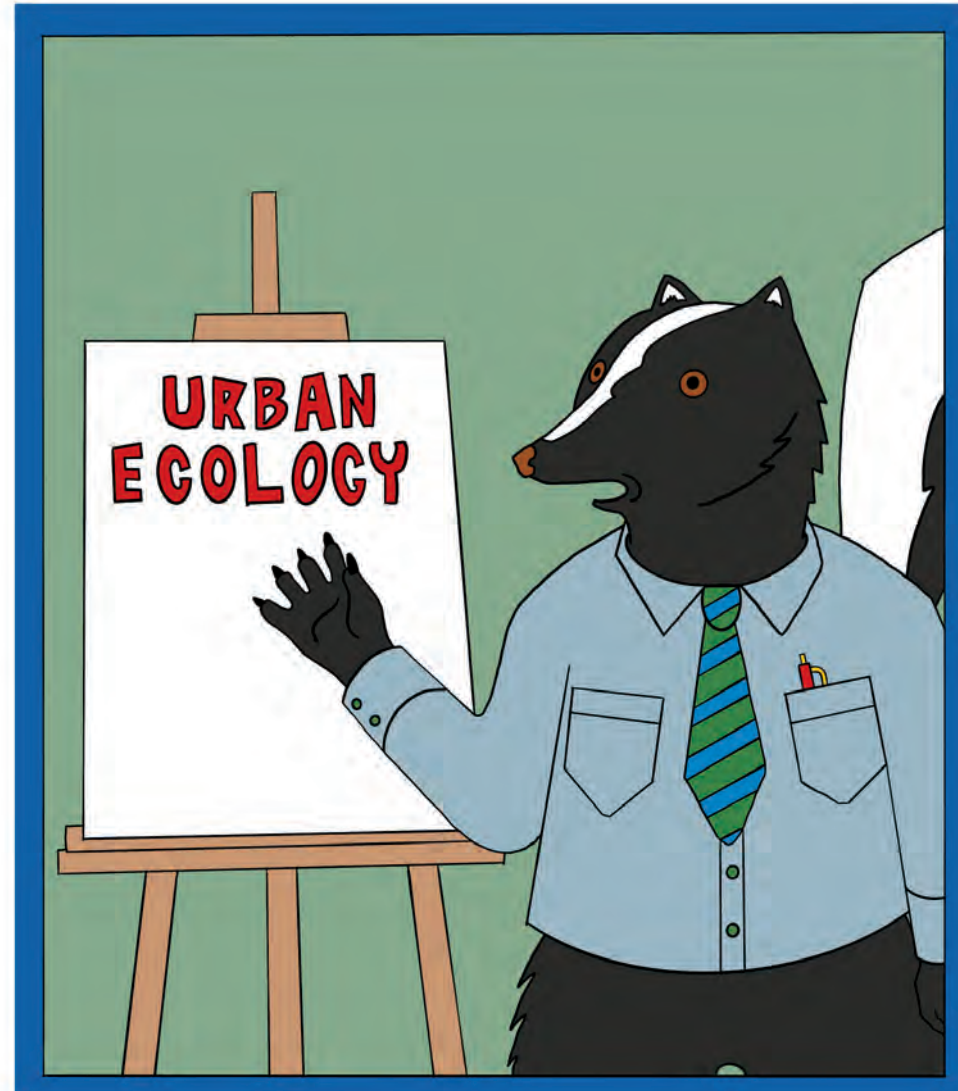
Farrell, J. (2024, January 16). Alberta's roadkill numbers soar with more than 7,000 animals reported hit and killed last year. CBC Edmonton. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/alberta-s-roadkill-numbers-soar-with-more-than-7-000-animals-reported-hit-and-killed-last-year-1.7300404>

Summerfield, P. (2024, June 24). Facebook still the most popular social network among Canadian adults. Media in Canada. <https://mediaincanada.com/2024/06/24/facebook-still-the-most-popular-social-network-among-canadians>

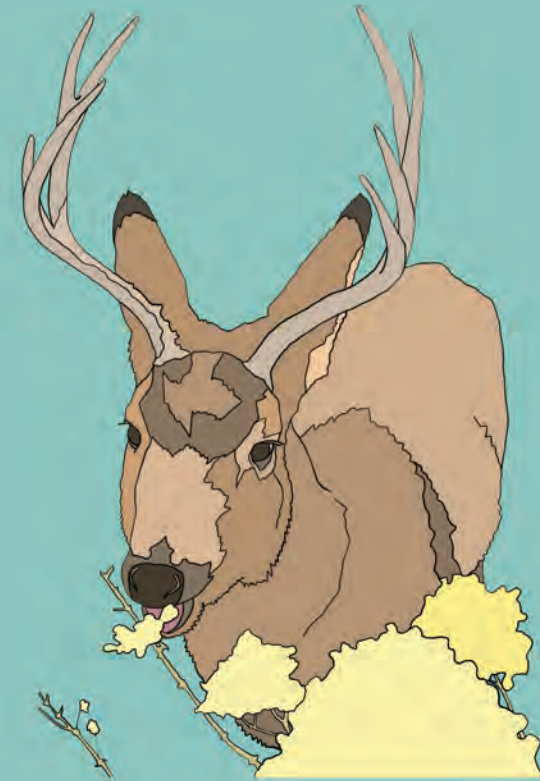
Urban ecology is the study of how a broad range of flora and fauna, including humans, interact with each other in an urban environment. This includes how they shape and are shaped by that environment.

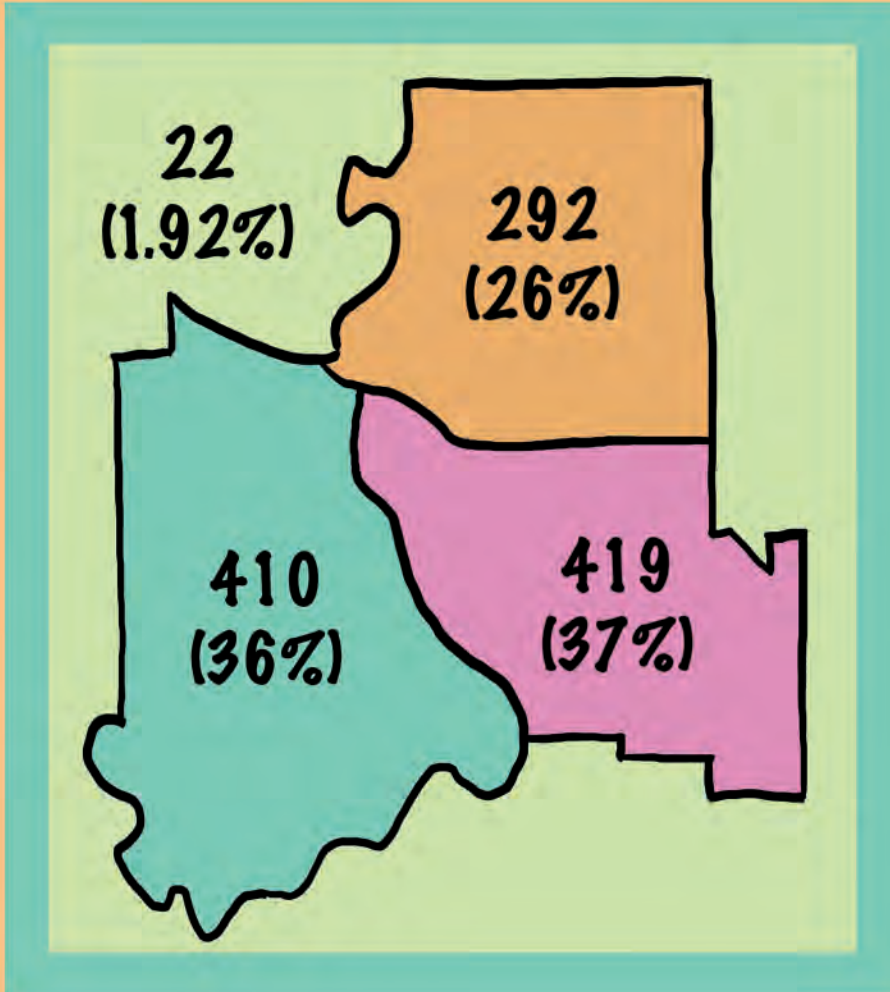
"Backyard Wilderness" is my effort to understand people's connection to urban wildlife and whether or not they see themselves as a part of nature, or as something external to nature. I ask, how do we create environments where we can coexist? In short, the desired outcome of my research is to increase awareness of, and the need for, engagement with urban spaces as places in which humans and other species can live and thrive together.

The following is an overview of the quantitative data collected.



**I developed an online survey to better understand the kinds of urban wildlife that visited people's yards and how they felt about these visitors. It was a 10 question survey that asked things like, do you believe wild animals visit your property? Which types of animals? And, do you think there are any aspects of your property that make it attractive to wild animals?**





**1 143 people took the first "Backyard Wilderness" survey.**

**410 (36%) responded that they lived in West Lethbridge.**

**292 (26%) responded that they lived in North Lethbridge.**

**419 (37%) responded that they lived in South Lethbridge.**

**22 (1.92%) came from outside Lethbridge city limits.**

## Age range of first survey respondents.



18-31  
20%

32-45  
26%

46-59  
27%

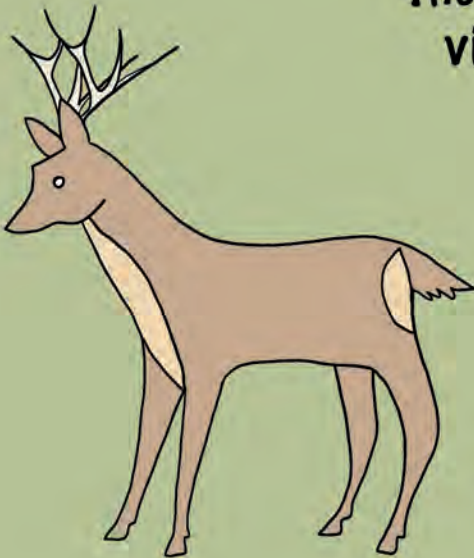
60-73  
22%

74-86  
3%

87+  
n = 2

After Keith Haring's Untitled Dance.

The top 5 types of animals people reported visited their yards in the first survey.



63%



61%



44%



24%



21%

\*Birds would have been present in most, if not all, yards. I suspect specifying birds as a class rather than by species led to lower reporting.

# Reported Signs of Wildlife



**Sightings**  
**944**



**Smells**  
**147**



**Scat**  
**255**



**Damage to plants**  
**53**

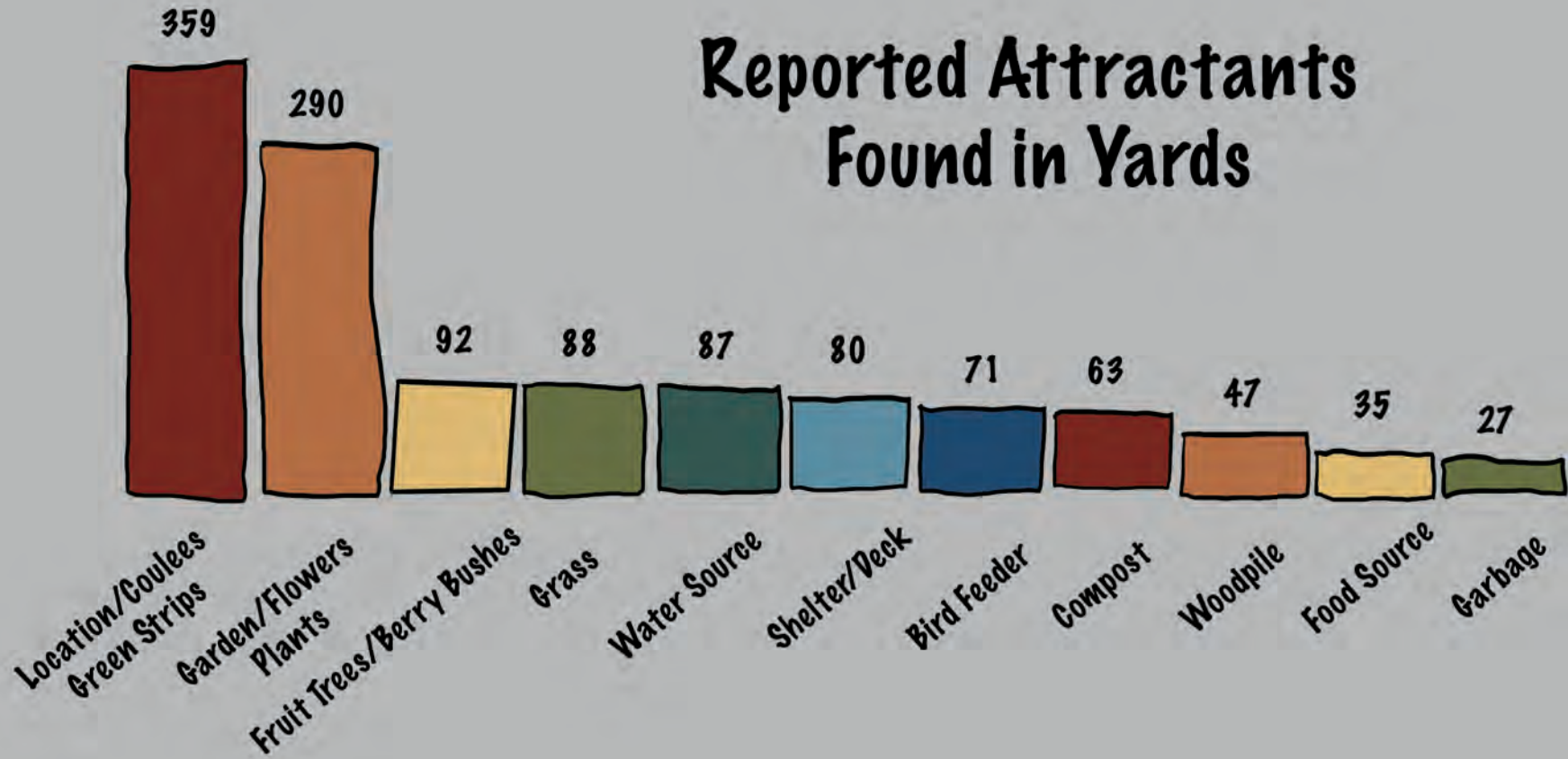


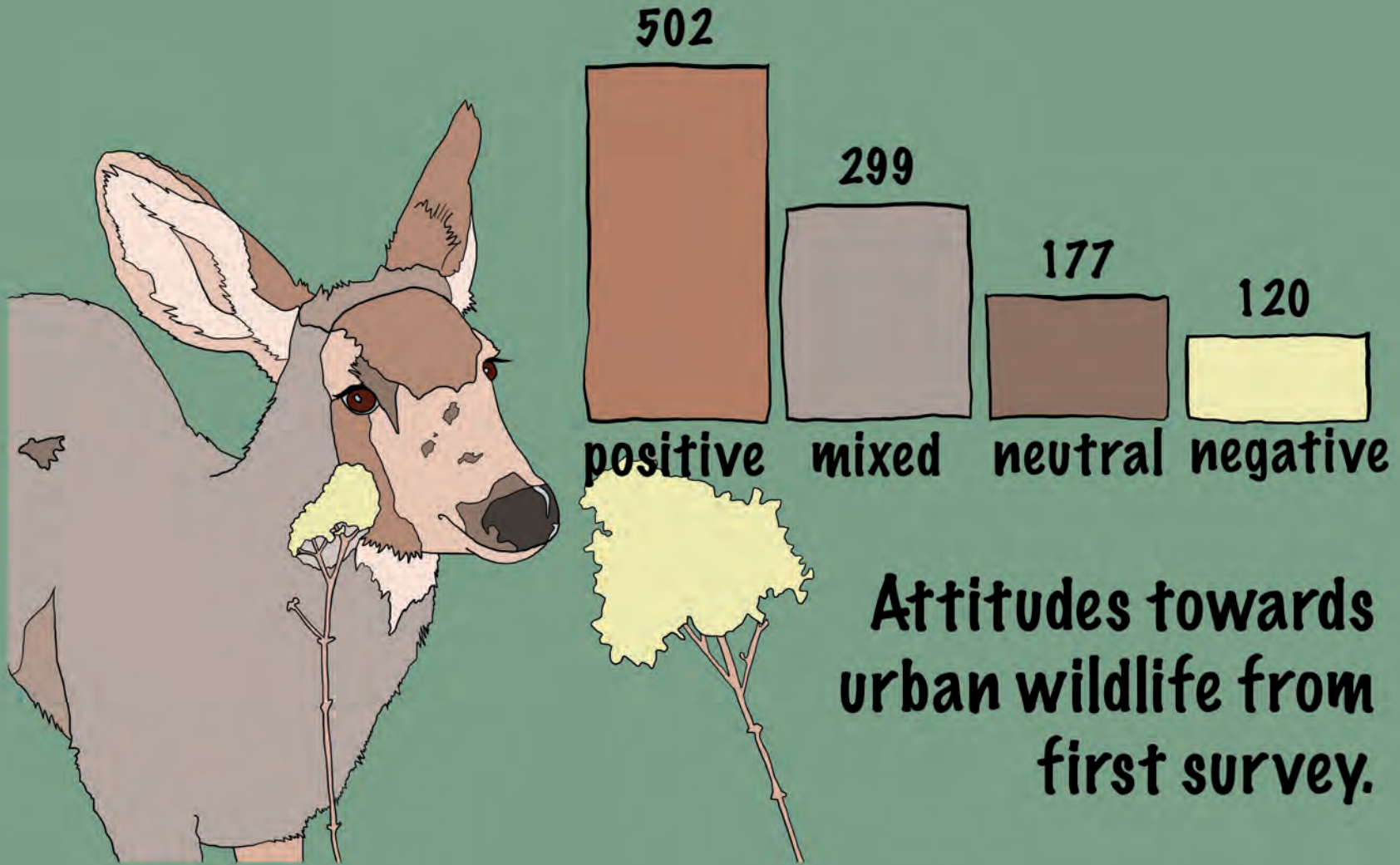
**Tracks**  
**158**



**Sounds**  
**45**

# Reported Attractants Found in Yards





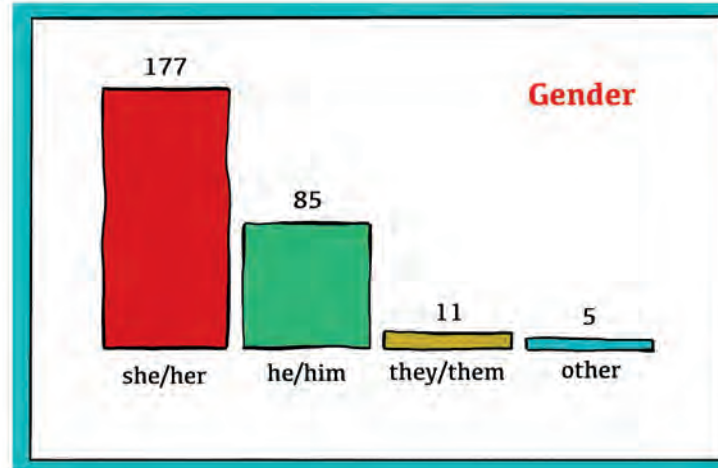
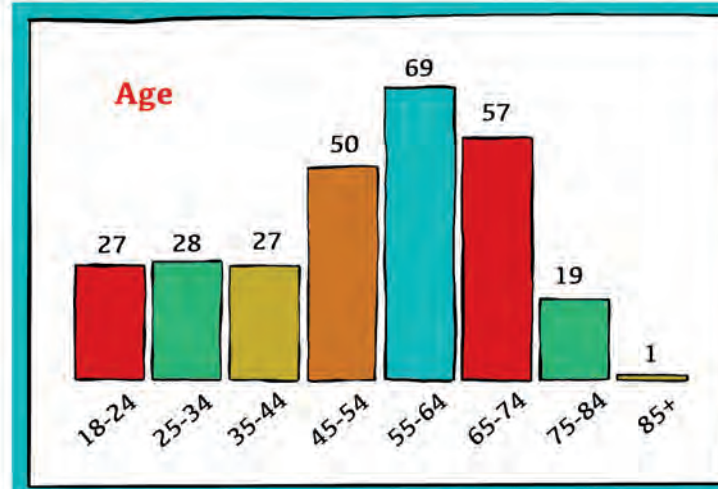
**With the second survey, I wanted to address absences from the first survey and really get down to the nitty gritty. For example, what did people think about their pets interacting with urban wildlife? What were good tactics for managing urban wildlife populations? And, were respondents worried about wild animals transmitting diseases?**



The second survey was taken by 278 respondents. The following six bar charts helps tell us who they were.

For example, 63% of those who participated were between the ages of 45 and 74.

63% identified as female.



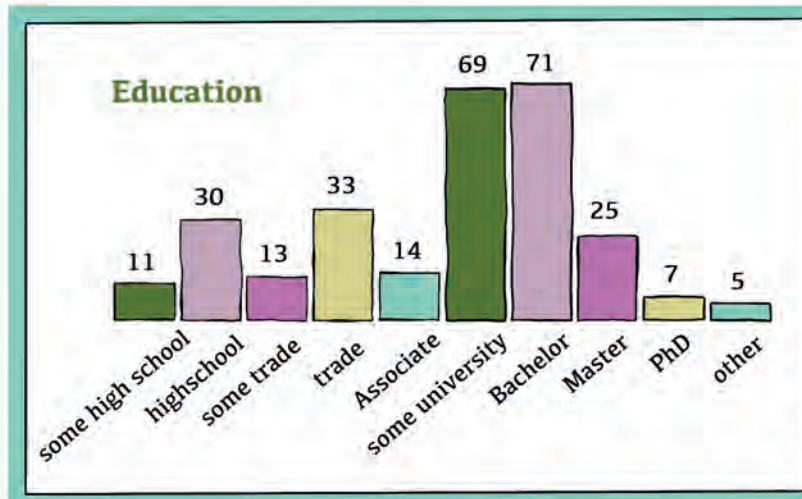
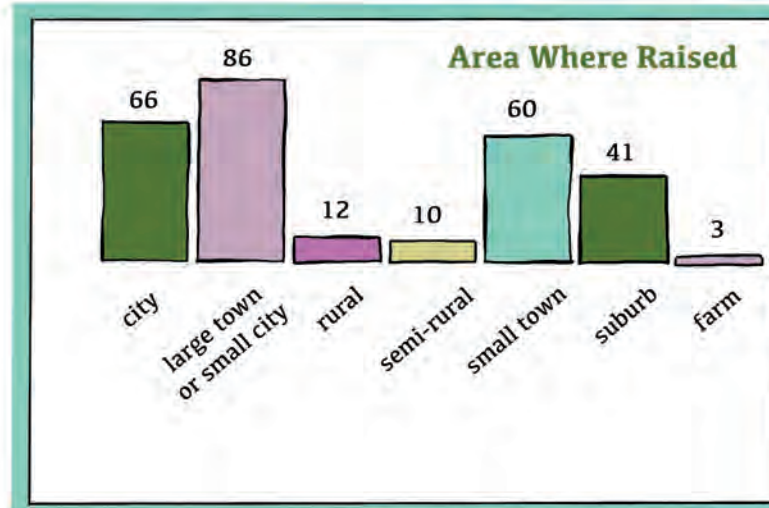
The following definitions were given to respondents:

small town = 1,000-9,999

large town = 10,000-99,999

city = 100,000+

“On a reserve” was provided as an option, but was not checked by any participants.



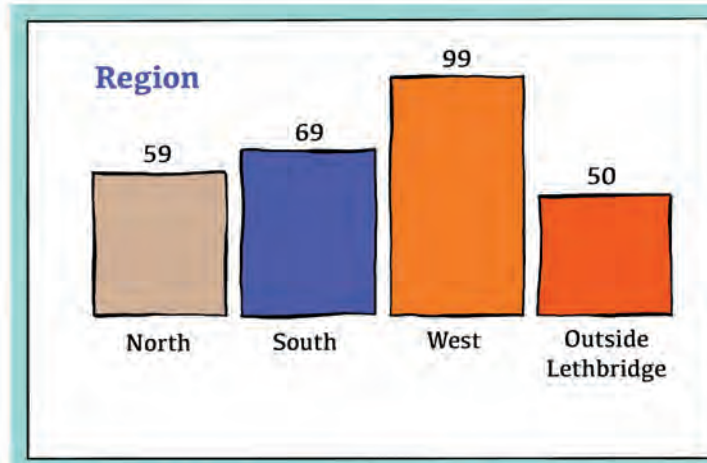
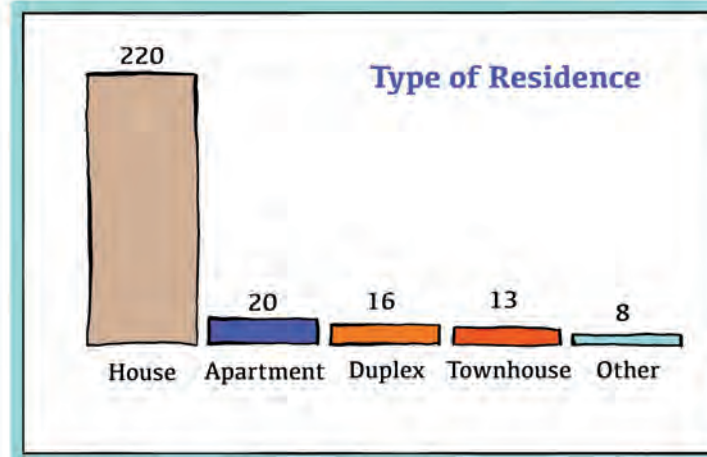
**77% of respondents lived in detached houses.**

**36% resided in West Lethbridge.**

**25% resided in South Lethbridge.**

**21% resided in North Lethbridge.**

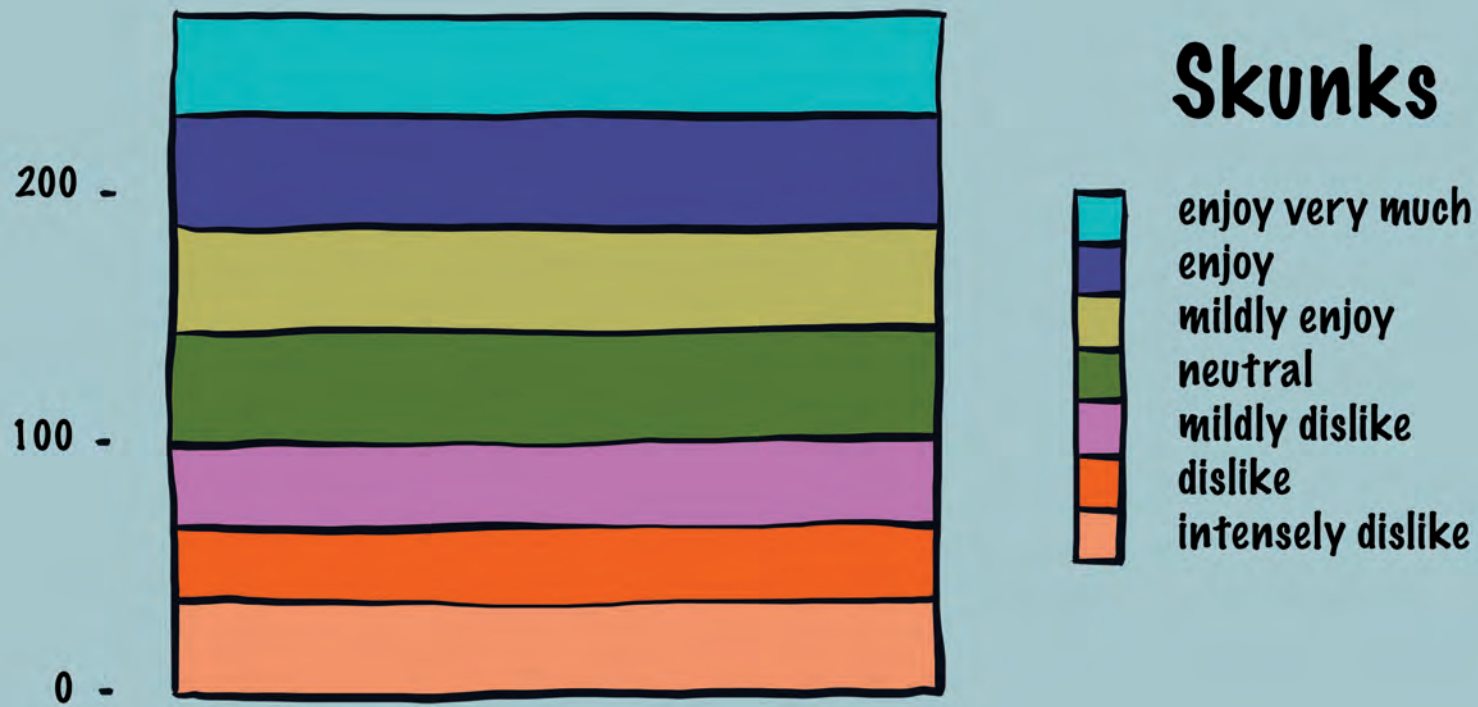
**And 18% resided outside of Lethbridge city limits.**







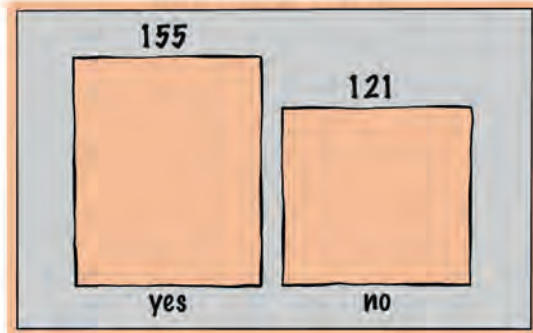
**"We adapted to the  
skunk family and made  
efforts to minimize  
disrupting them."**



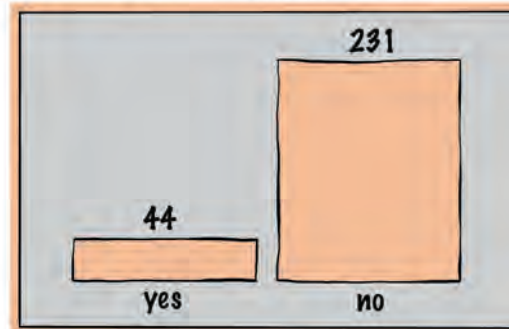
**Rate skunks on a scale of how much you enjoy seeing the animal within city limits.**



Do you intentionally feed or water wildlife within city limits?

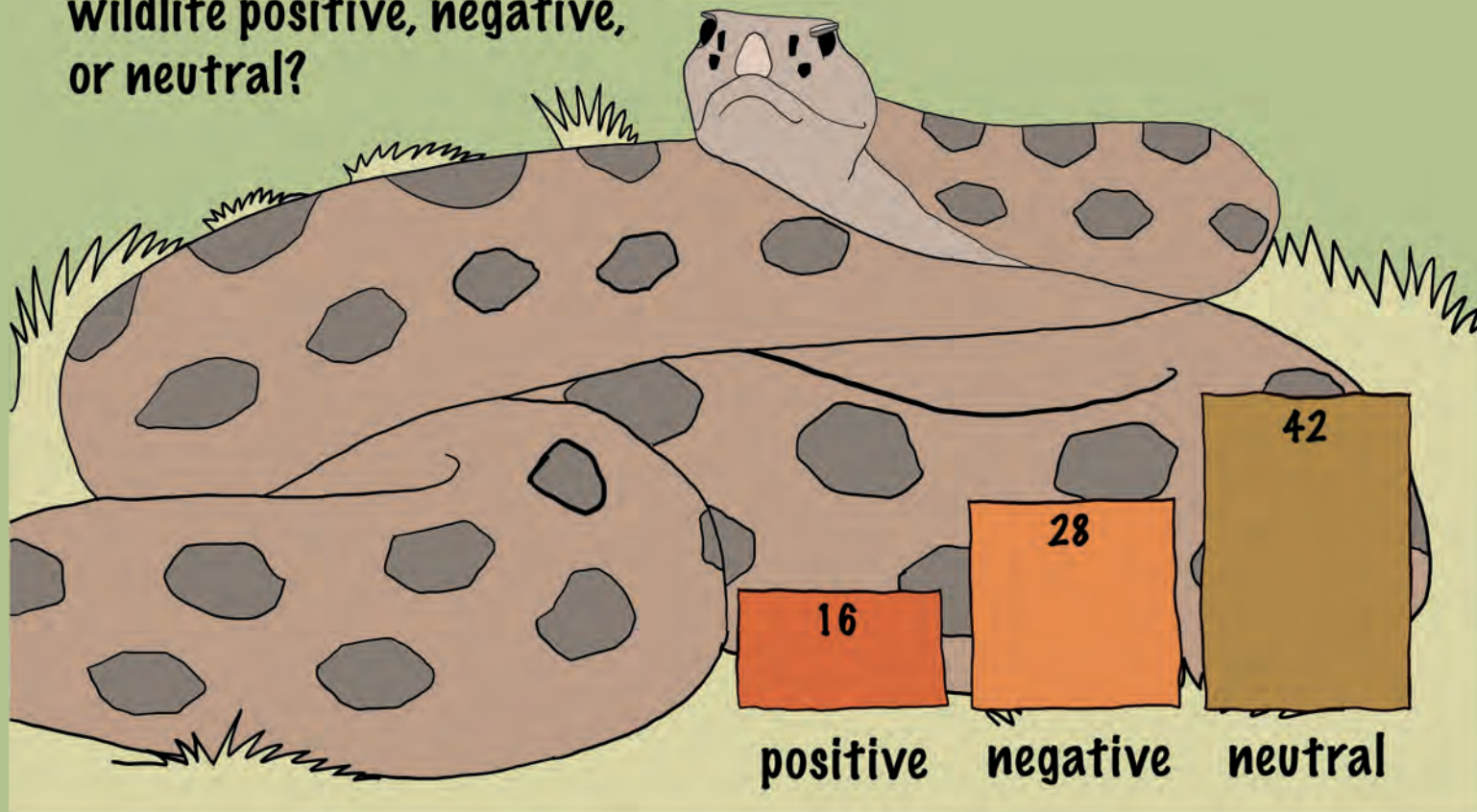


Should people intentionally feed or water wildlife within city limits?



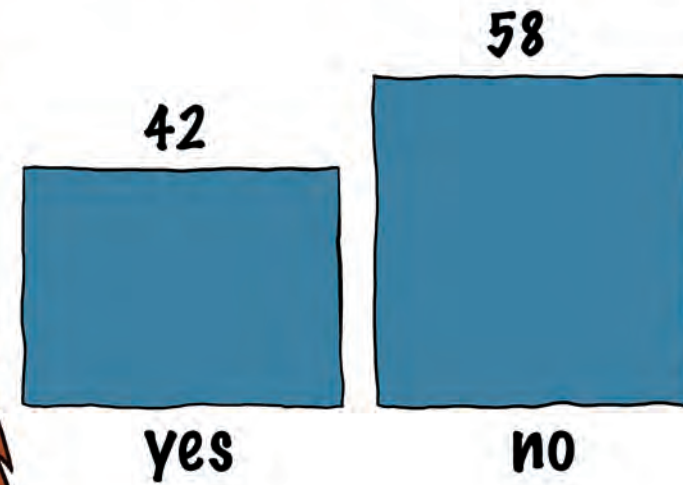


Was your dog's interaction with wildlife positive, negative, or neutral?

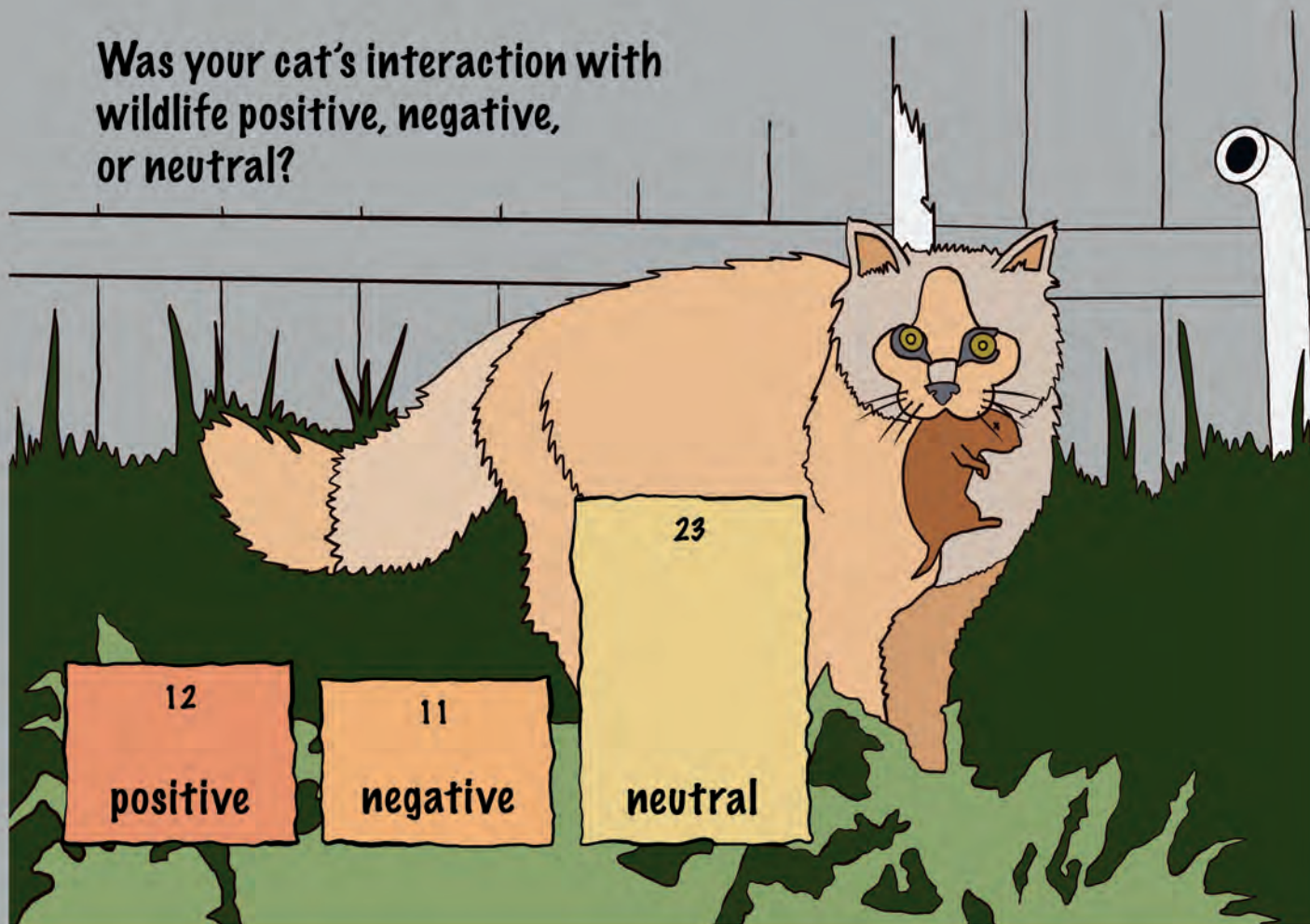


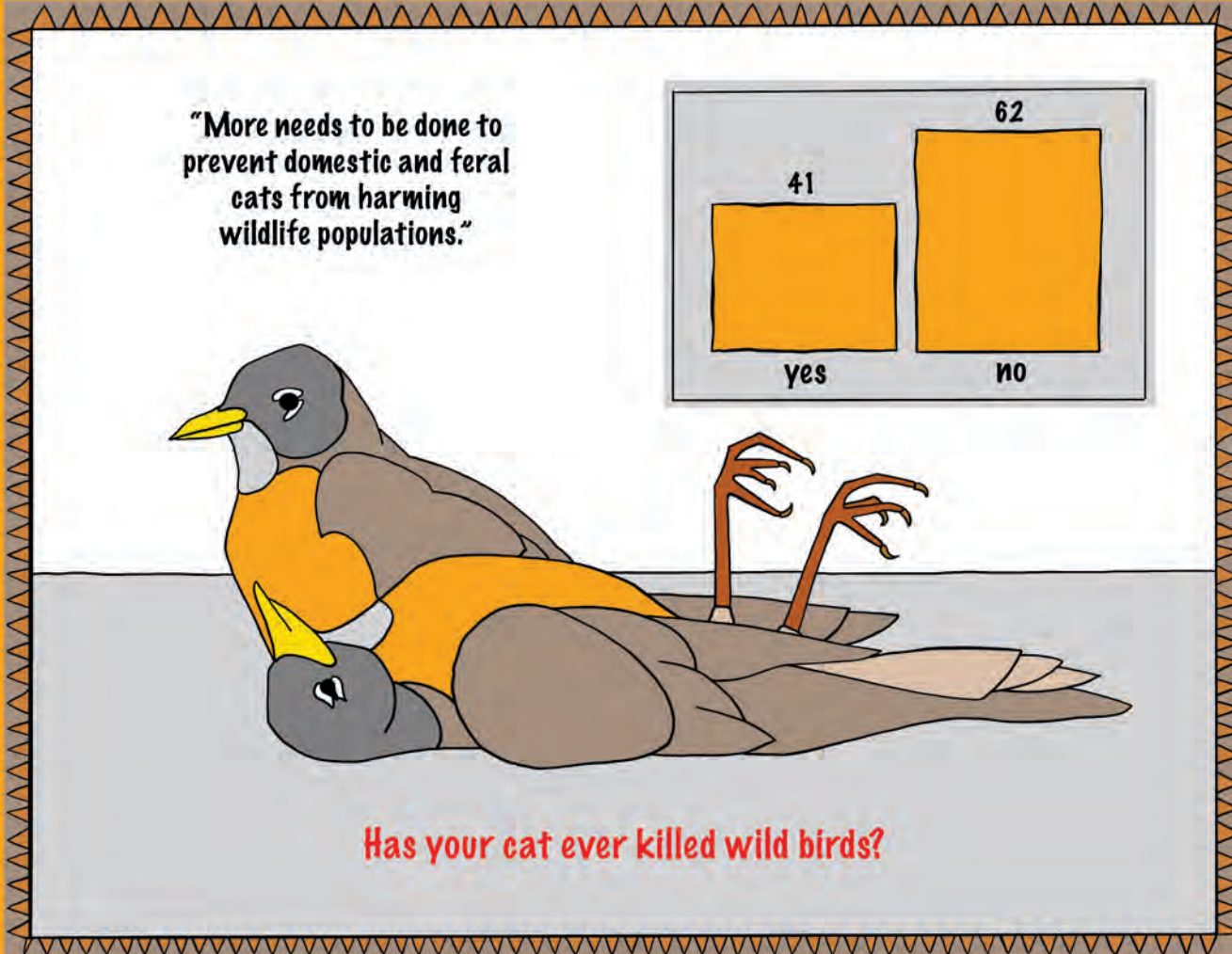


Has your cat had an interaction with wildlife within city limits?



Was your cat's interaction with wildlife positive, negative, or neutral?





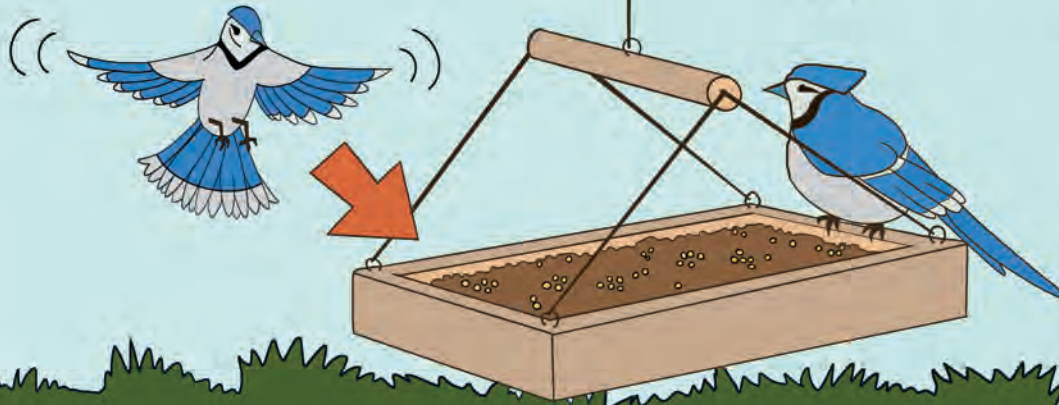
Do you have a bird feeder?

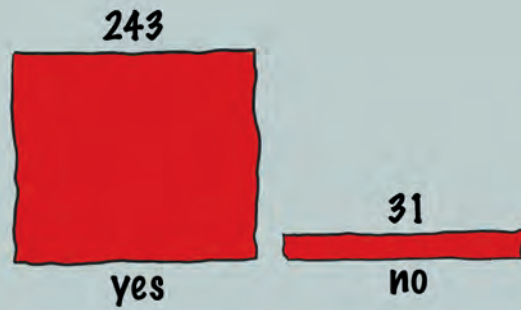
180

Yes

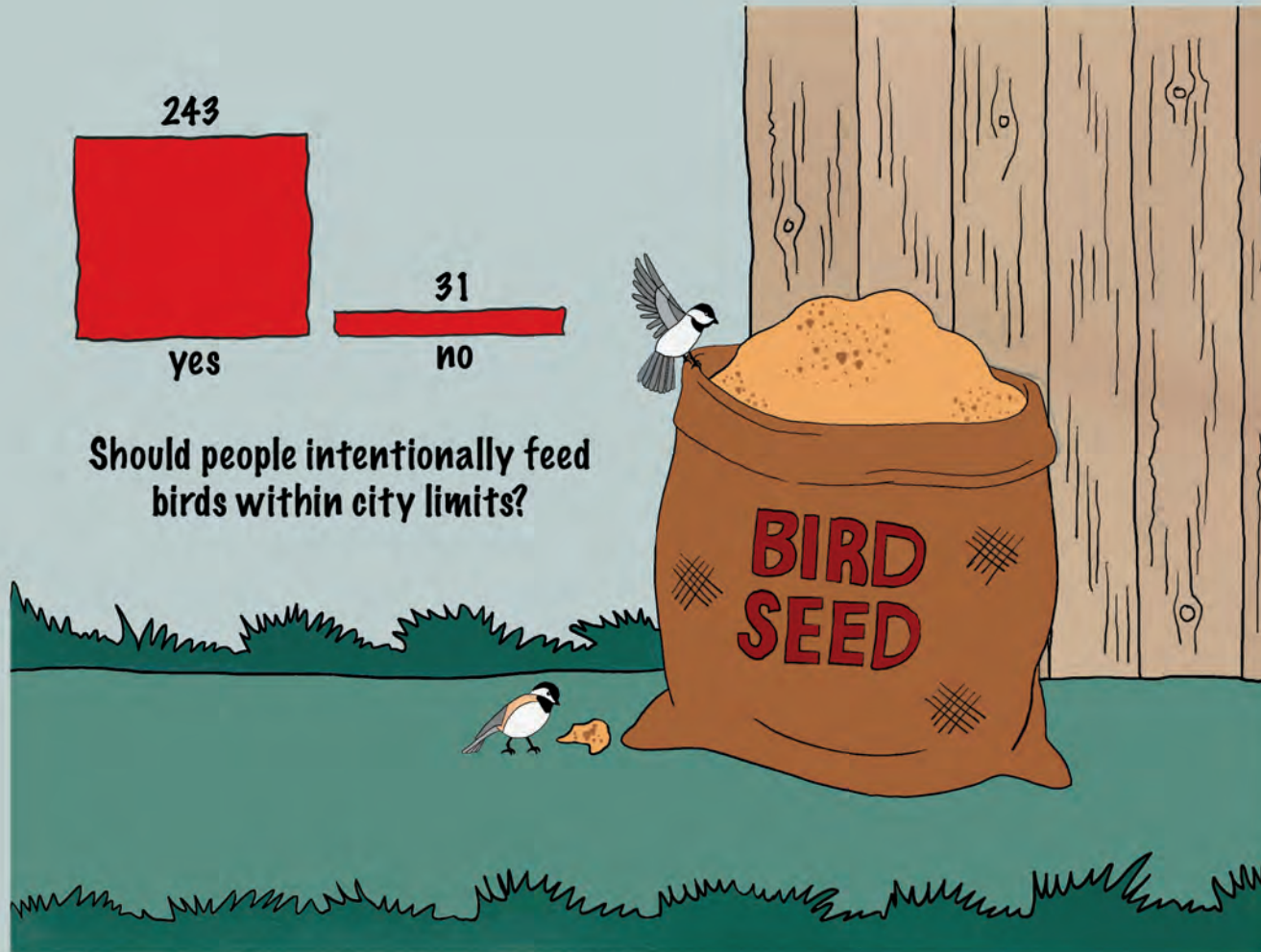
97

No

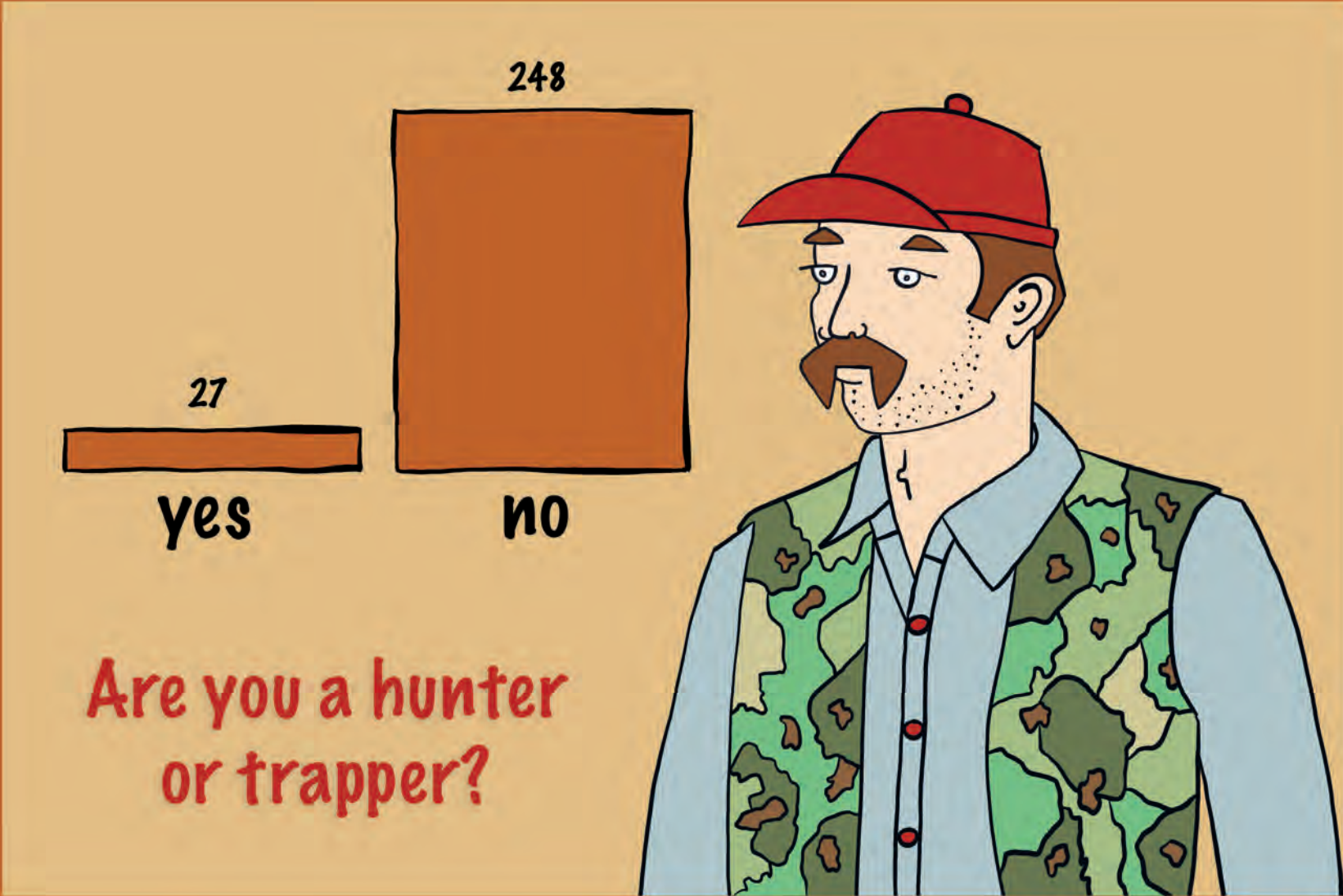




Should people intentionally feed birds within city limits?







219



yes

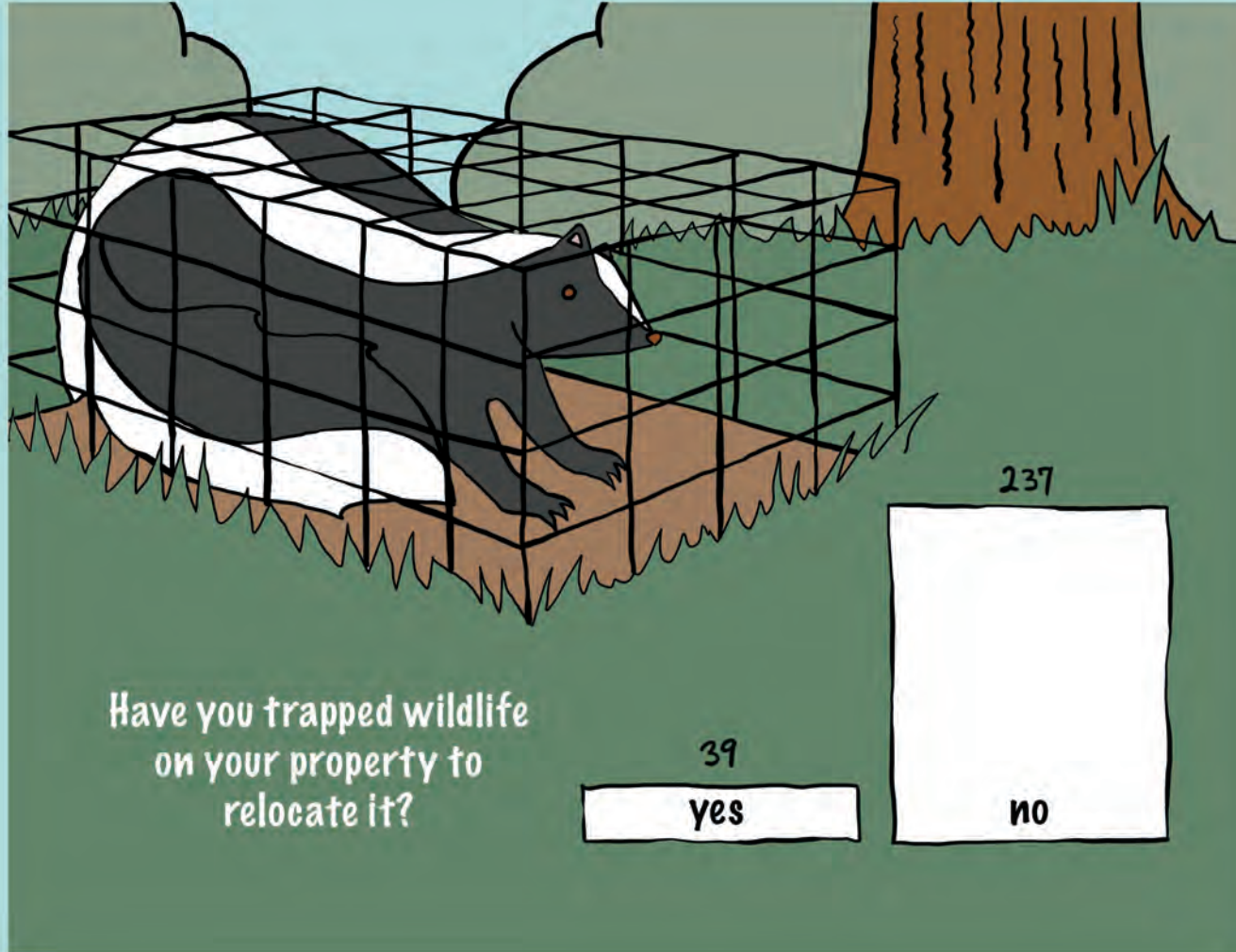
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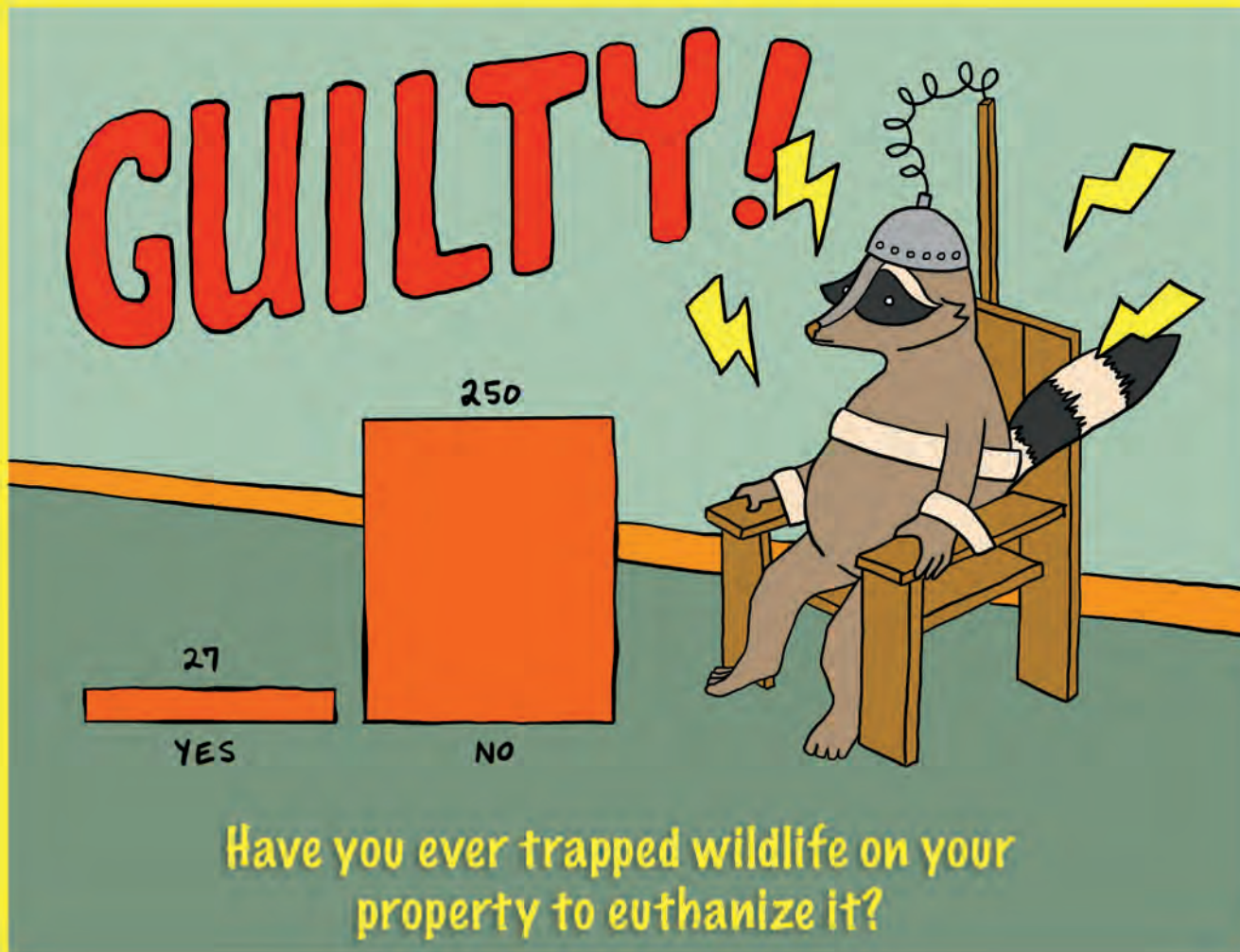


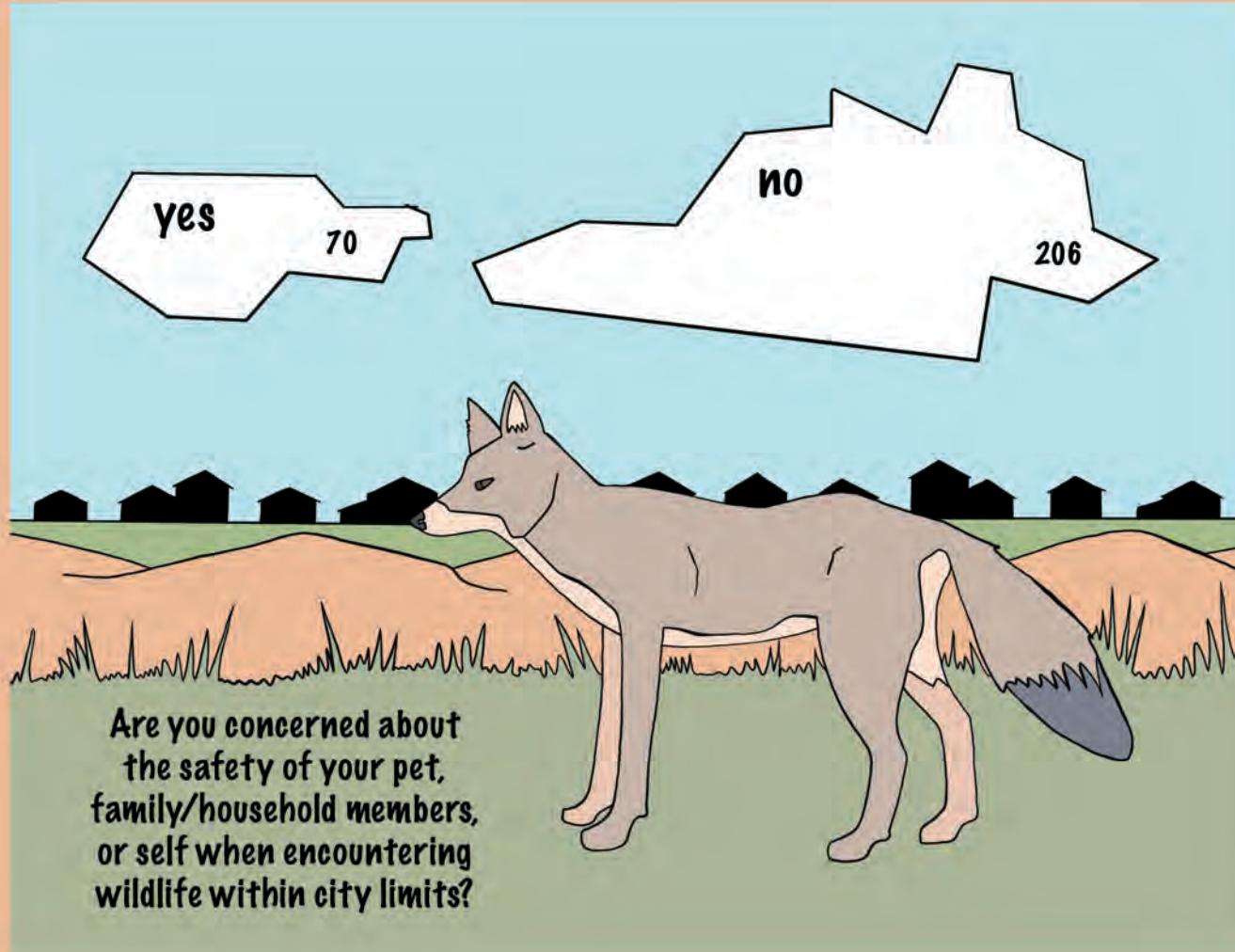
no

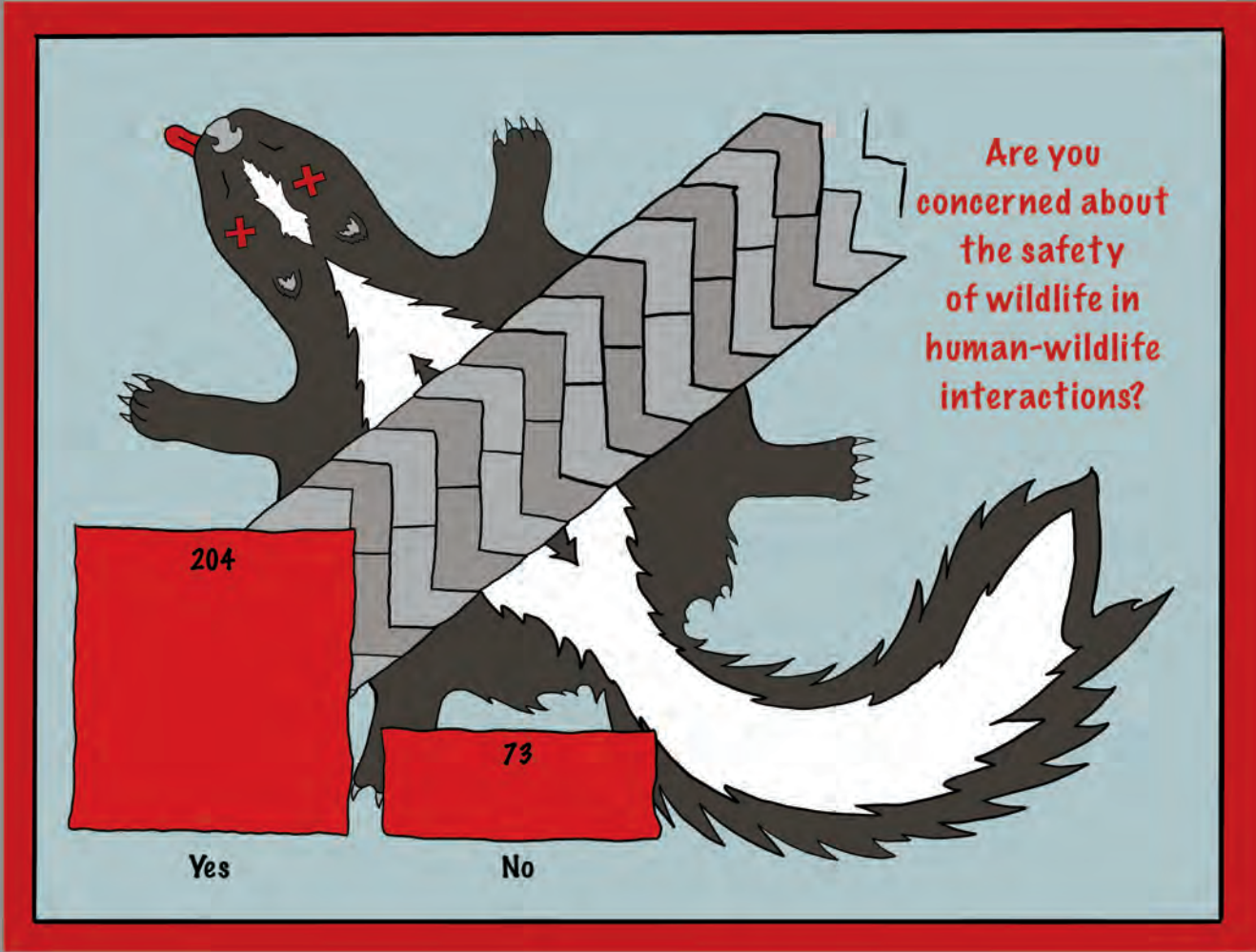
**Are you a  
bird watcher?**

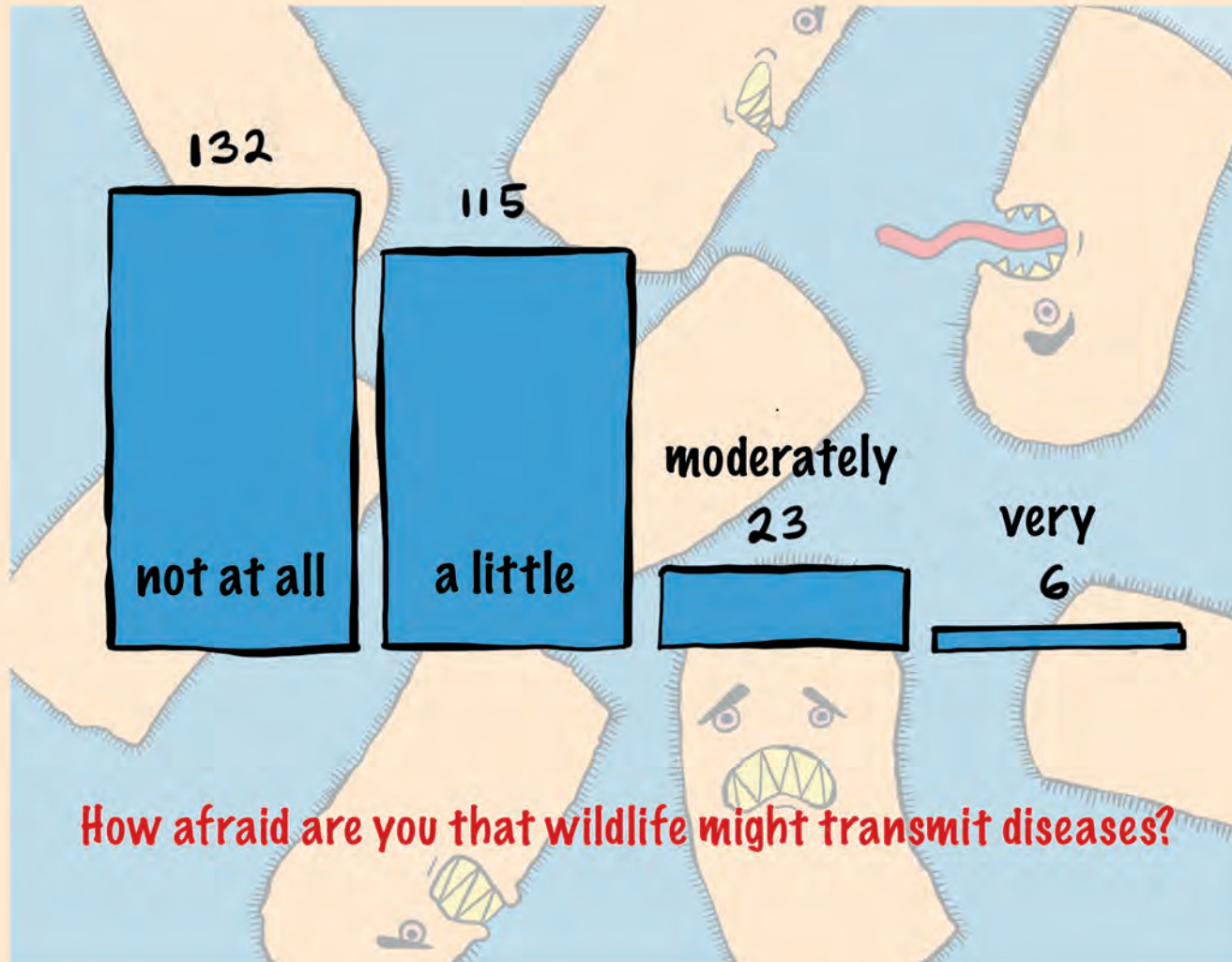


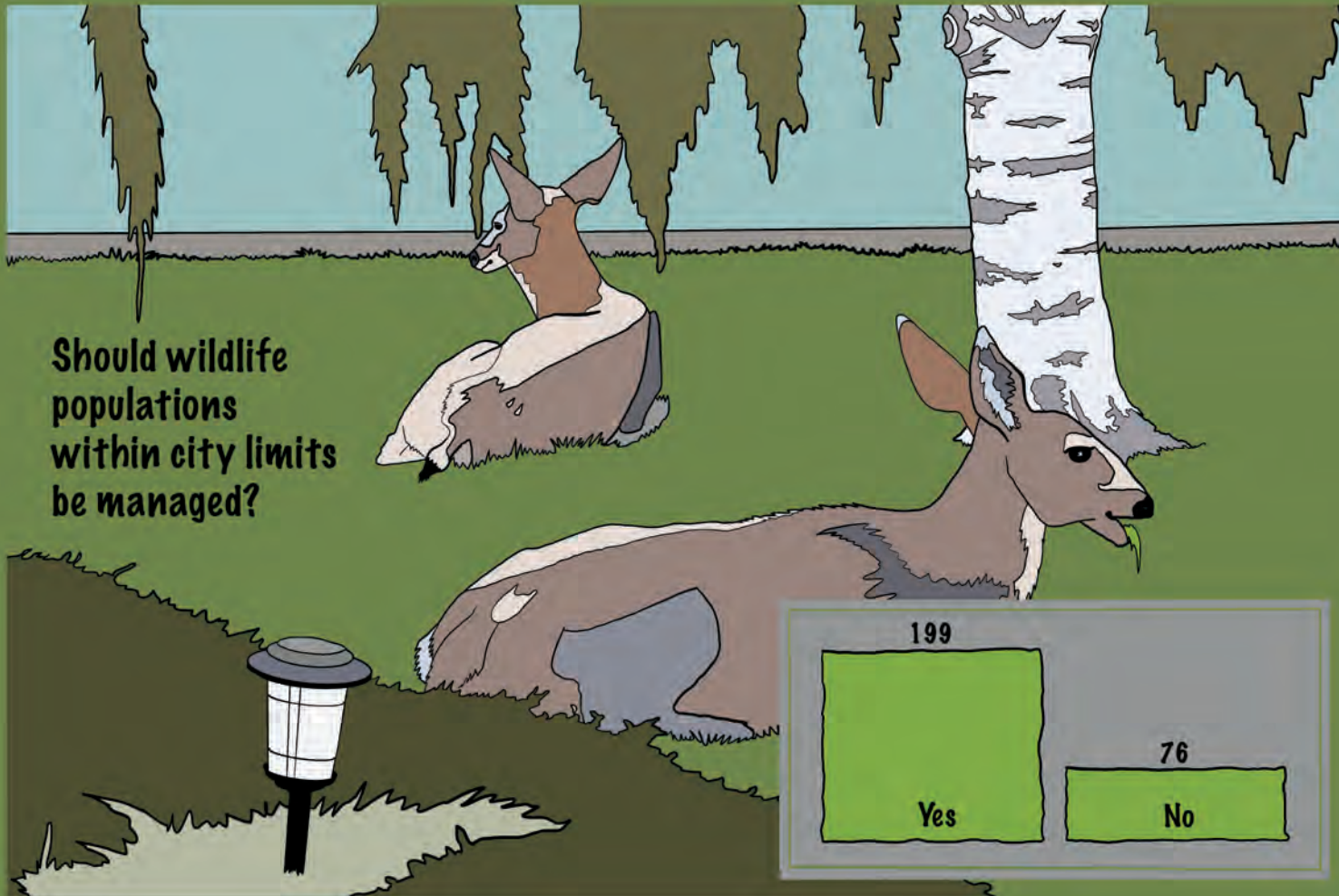






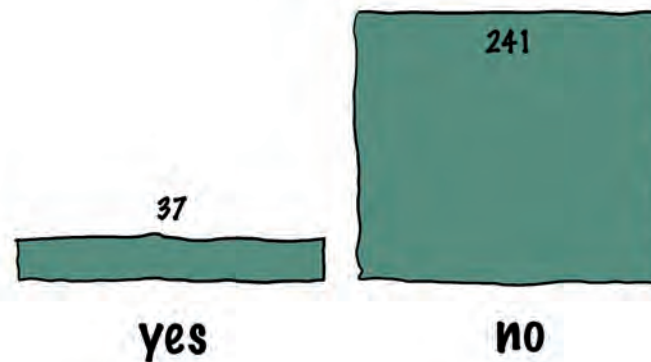


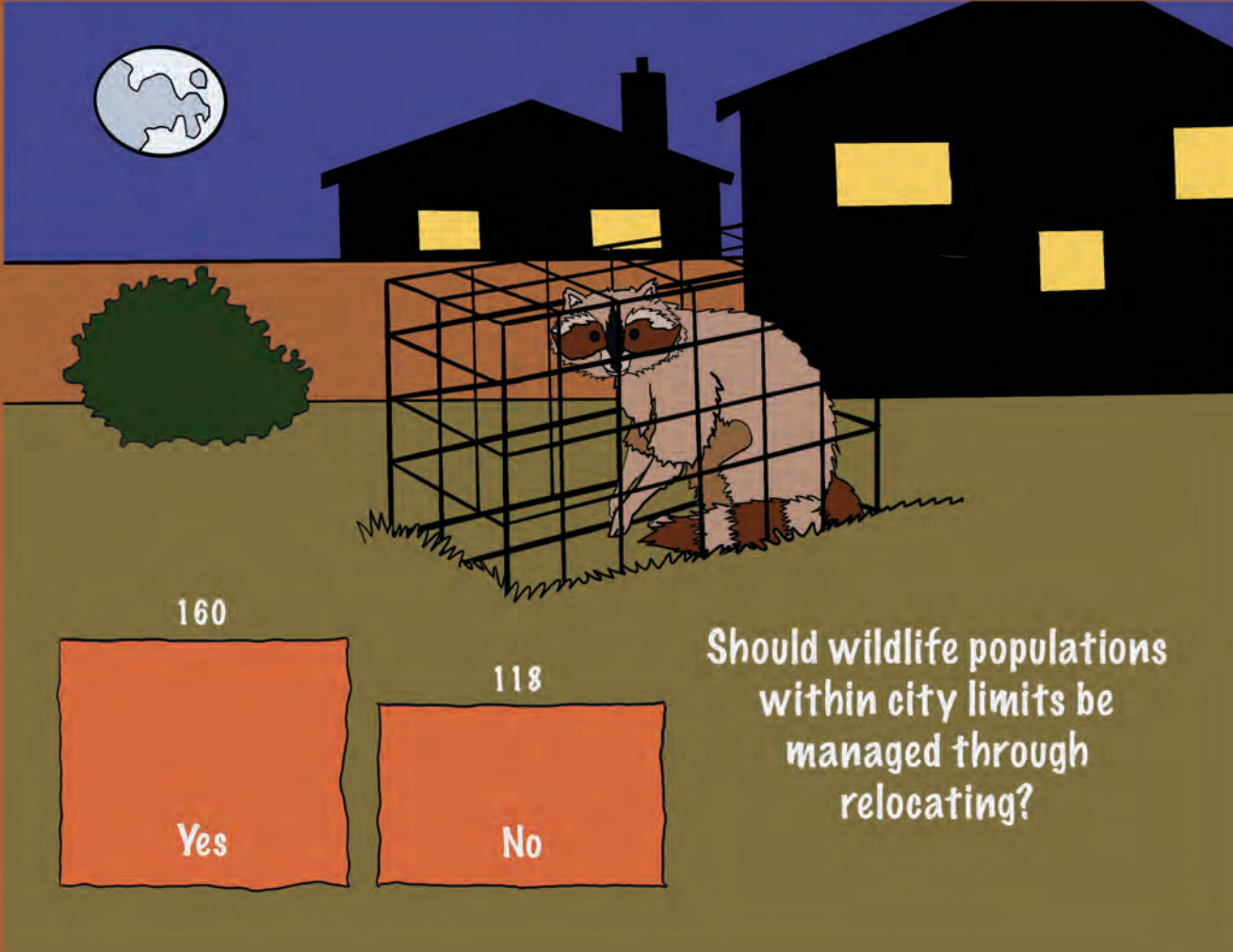


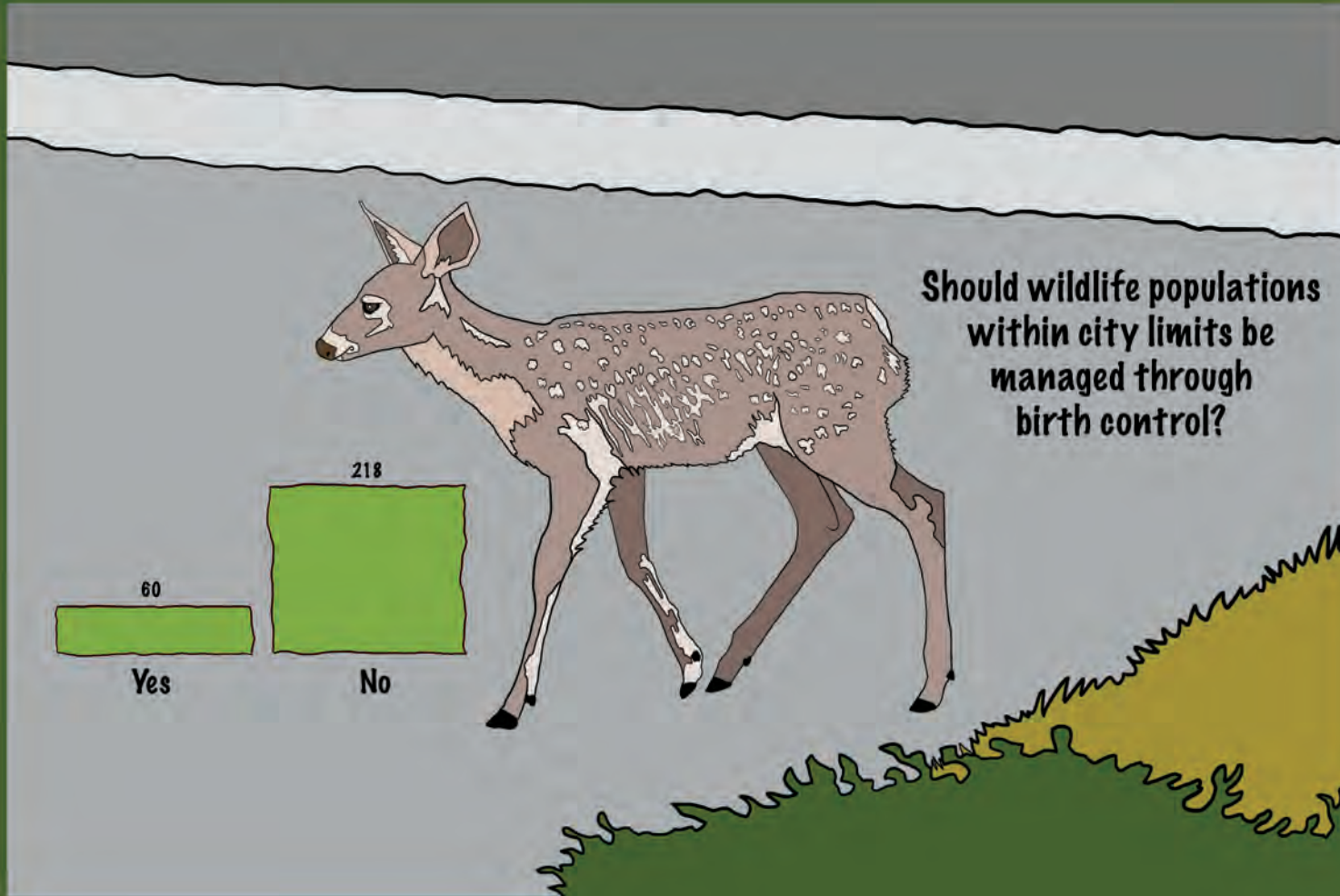




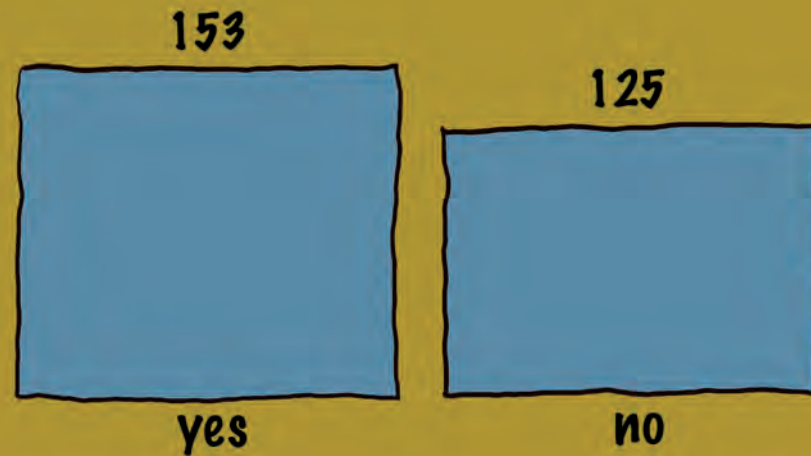
**Should wildlife populations within city limits be managed by culling?**



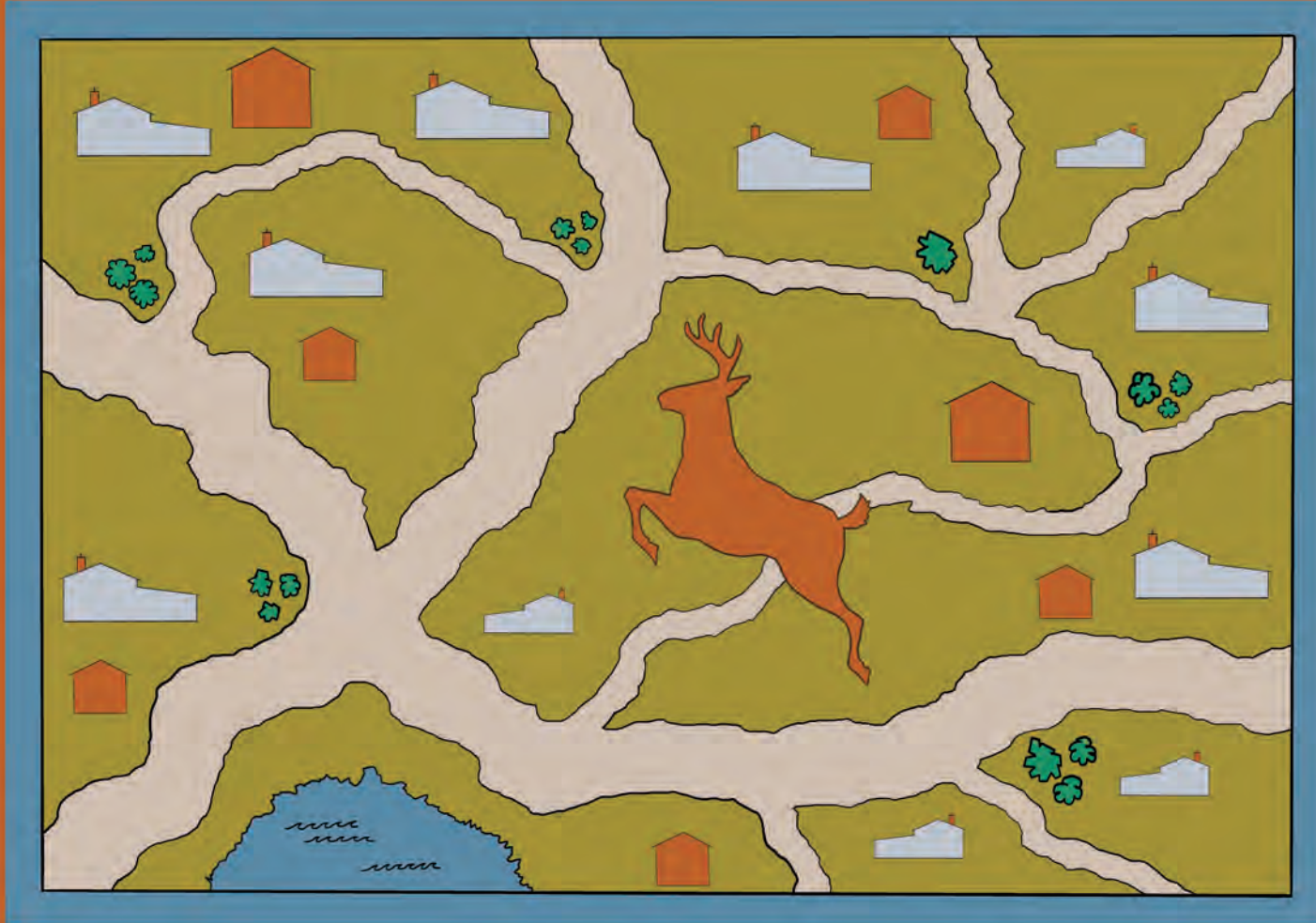




**Should wildlife be managed through the connection of green spaces for movement within city limits?**



**“Urban wildlife makes Lethbridge a great place to live! It provides a constant reminder of the biodiversity that exists on our planet—and how our lives are linked together!”**

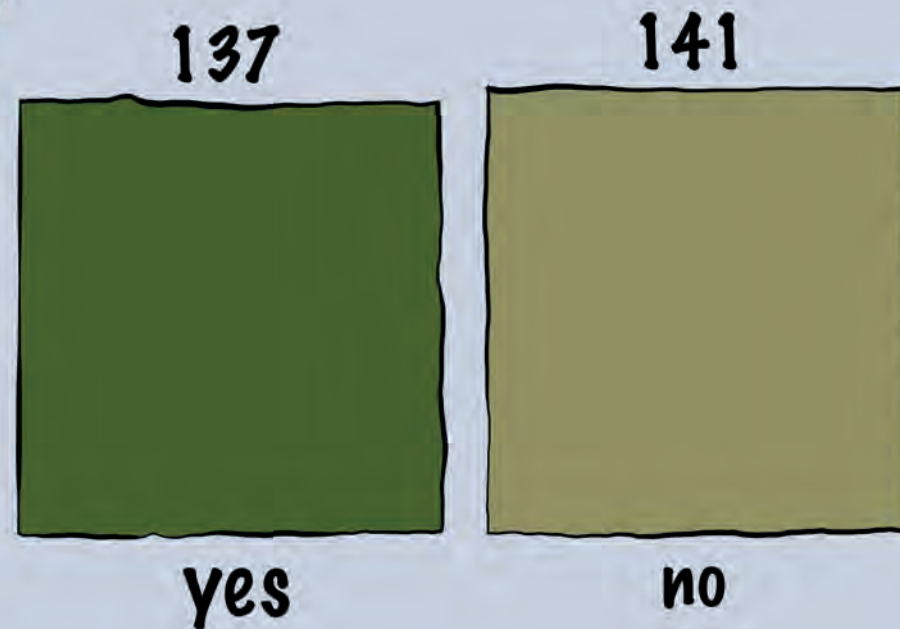


Should wildlife within city limits be managed by providing veterinary services?





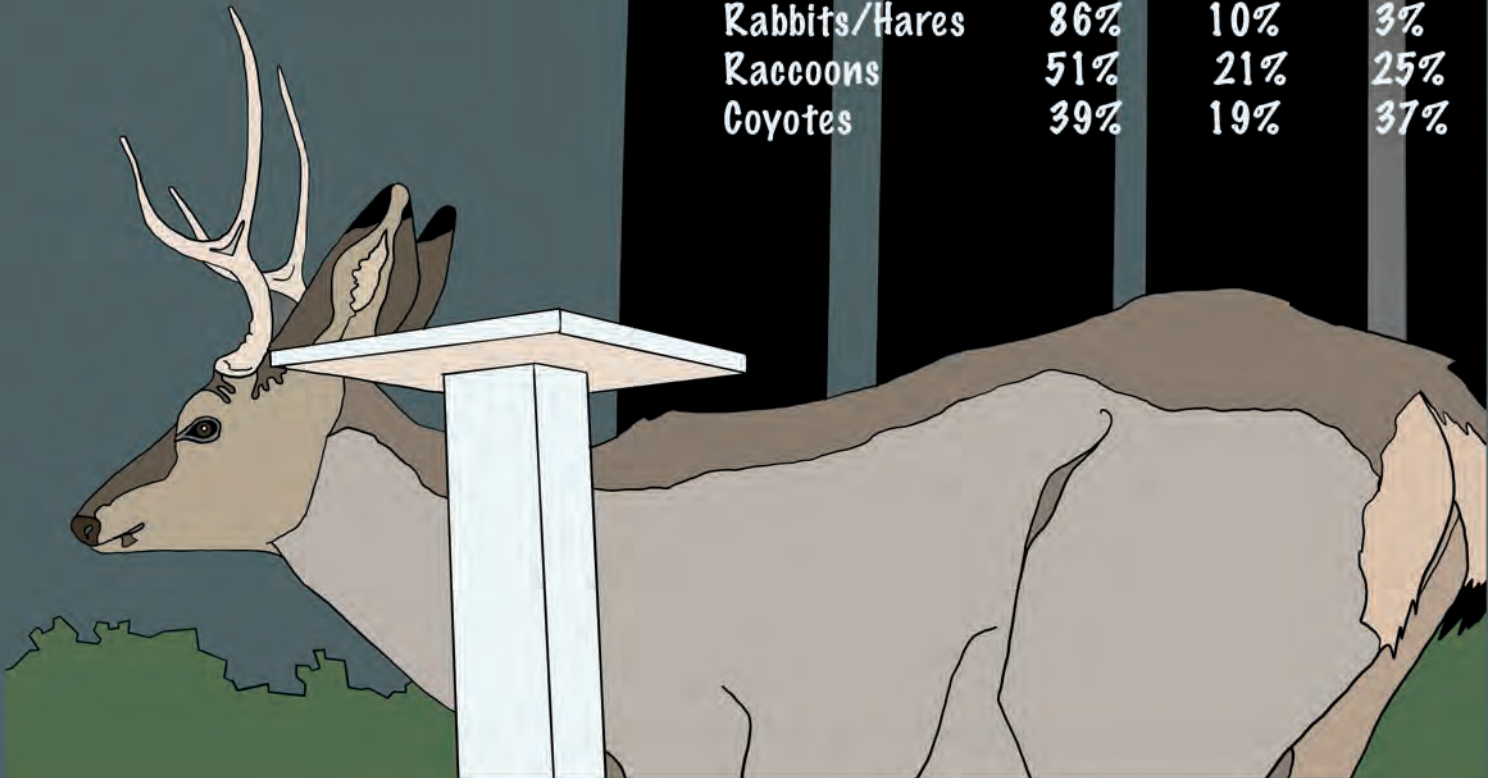
**Should wildlife populations  
within city limits be managed  
through safe crossings?**





# Rate Mammals

Animal	Enjoy	Neutral	Dislike
Deer	90%	4%	4%
Skunks	47%	17%	36%
Rabbits/Hares	86%	10%	3%
Raccoons	51%	21%	25%
Coyotes	39%	19%	37%



## Rate Birds

Bird	Enjoy	Neutral	Dislike
Magpies	52%	18%	28%
Crows	55%	18%	25%
Gulls	45%	33%	21%
Other	95%	4%	0

"Other backyard birds: collared doves, downy woodpeckers, nut-hatches, sparrows, house finches, waxwings, rock wrens, juncos, larks, [and] hummingbirds."



## Summary

### First Survey

The first survey drew 1,143 respondents, about 1% of the population of each region of the city. The age range of respondents reflected the age range of Facebook users where the survey was posted, with 312 (27%) aged 46–59. While Facebook is popular with all ages, older people tend to use it more than other platforms: “Those aged 50 to 64 (83%) are the biggest users, followed closely by 35 to 49 (81%)” (Summerfield, 2024).

The most common sign of wildlife that respondents reported was sightings (83%), though many (22%) indicated that they were able to tell animals had visited based on scat/droppings.

Initially, I had assumed that water would be the greatest attractant; it was trumped by food source for both skunks and raccoons. Side note—one trail camera host (from a different study) who had both skunks and raccoons routinely put out cat food. In the future, I would specifically ask whether people leave out food for their pets that could lure other animals.

### Second Survey

I had a much smaller uptake for the second survey with only 278 respondents—a meager 0.2% of residents per region. I believe two factors led to this decrease from the first survey: survey exhaustion and the length of the second survey (50 questions rather than 10). Again, the bulk of respondents reflected Facebook age demographics. Most respondents (64%) identified as she/her, and most (51%) possessed a bachelor’s degree (26%) or some university education (25%).

Whereas the top three animals reported in the first survey were deer, skunks, and rabbits/hares, the top three in the second survey were deer, rabbits/hares, and mice. Skunks moved from second to fourth place. Because I included birds as a species rather than as a class, I was able to get a clearer picture of what birds were reported, with magpies, robins, and crows being the most frequently reported.

I was also able to refine my approach to attitudes. I included 7 categories on a Likert scale rather than 5 in an attempt to get a more nuanced understanding of people’s feelings. The most popular animals were deer, rabbits/hares, and porcupines. In the first survey, people who reported