

Posted on Wed, Jan. 14, 2004

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Welcome to South Florida -- and beware of the monkeys

How to know when you are in Dania Beach: when the horde of wild monkeys at the rent-a-car agency throws mango pits.

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At the Airport Hertz Rent-A-Car on Seventh Avenue in Dania Beach, you can get a Mustang or a Jaguar.

If a monkey doesn't get you first.

You know you are not in New York or Chicago when the airport rent-a-car place has signs reminding customers not to feed the monkeys, which have been spied tossing mango pits at people and using trash-can tops as cymbals.

In fact, Hertz is just the latest location in Dania Beach to be beset by a plague of vervets, aka green monkeys, which have been making the small city their own private urban jungle for decades. The monkeys with flattened black faces and white furry beards swing through the trees and sometimes skitter across nearby mobile-home roofs, making a sound akin to a thunderstorm.

They have been known to climb into newly washed cars in the neighborhood and make a mess of their interior. They love to jump on the roofs, trampoline style.

"It's a dominance thing," said Ron Magill, a spokesman for Metrozoo, who said the males are especially keen on activities that make a lot of noise.

Debbie White, a grandmother of seven from Amelia Island, ran into about 20 of them while waiting for a Camry on a recent afternoon. On that day, they were quiet but playful.

"It was like being at the zoo," she said.

Monkeys apparently don't cause much of a blip on the South Florida weird-o-meter. An employee named Wes, standing near "monkey row" near the Hertz car wash machinery, shrugged off the phenomenon, as did several colleagues, who no longer find the monkeys interesting or unusual. In keeping with Hertz corporate policy, Wes would not give a last name for publication.

The vervets have deep roots in the Dania Beach area -- deeper, in fact, than the Hertz outlet at 2150 NE Seventh Ave. They apparently date back to a roadside primate attraction that closed shop in the early 1950s.

The owner was able to sell off most of the larger primates, but the vervets and a handful of squirrel monkeys didn't find any takers.

According to the locals who have been coexisting with the monkeys for decades, someone at the farm simply opened the cage and set the captives free.

The escapees fled to the forest, where they developed a diet of grasshoppers, beetles, small crabs, and, on occasion, the food in Fido's dog bowl.

Do-gooders have supplied them with Fig Newtons, Doritos and, of course, bananas. That's been illegal since 1993, and can cost you a \$500 fine.

Still, lots of people love those monkeys.

Chakka McGee, an assistant manager at Motel 6 on Dania Beach Boulevard, said tourists often request rooms on the east side of the inn to better observe the animals.

"It's good for business," she said.

William Weiner likes the monkeys but not the way they are treated.

The 64-year-old manager of Weiner's Mobile Park on East Dania Beach Boulevard remembers the monkeys playfully tugging on the tail of his mother's toy poodle.

But he also remembers kids tormenting the creatures by offering up treats, only to yank the snacks away. He has also seen too many monkeys become roadkill on Dania Beach Boulevard, which invariably leads to an unusual funeral ritual on the tree-lined thoroughfare.

"The whole troupe would come out and holler and scream," Weiner said.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission fields occasional complaints from residents.

Capt. Sam Cory, an area supervisor for Broward County, says monkeys are hard to trap.

Rather than try, trappers will shoot an offending animal with a tranquilizer dart. Officials test the immobilized monkey for viruses and then, if they are healthy, will place them in a ``permitted facility."

You don't want to mess with an unhealthy monkey. The animals can carry tuberculosis, various strains of hepatitis and a form of herpes potentially fatal to humans.

All the more reason they don't want you to feed the monkeys at Hertz Rent-A-Car.

"It's wildlife," said Wes. ``You don't want to get bitten. It's a lawsuit."

