URBAN COYOTES

BACKGROUND

The coyote (*Canis latrans*), a close relative of the wolf and the domestic dog, is found throughout virtually all of North America and is increasing its presence in urban areas. In fairly recent times, coyote populations have pushed eastward into places where they were previously unknown.

Coyotes are generalists. They can adapt to new places as long as there is enough food and shelter. They not only tolerate cities and towns, but may actually thrive in them. Urban coyotes were noteworthy enough in the greater Los Angeles area to be singled out for study in the 1960s. Taking refuge by day in the natural strips of vegetation left in the canyons and ravines, these urban coyotes moved easily in and out of settled areas, traveling and foraging in some of the more densely settled places. Since then, coyotes have shown up in Chicago and New York and dozens of smaller cities, perfectly happy to build dens in out-of-the-way woodlots and to forage the abundant food sources that cities provide.

NATURAL HISTORY

Coyotes are territorial, with the males marking their boundaries, as many canids do, with urine signposts. The size of the territory is directly related to the quality of the habitat, and often it takes several square miles to support a coyote family. Their dens may be an enlarged fox burrow, a rock ledge cave, or a shallow pit under a windblown tree.

Coyotes are opportunistic feeders that eat a wide variety of plants and animals. They primarily subsist on small mammals such as rats, mice, squirrels, and rabbits, but can survive on almost anything including garbage, fallen fruit, bird seed, and pet food.

Coyotes probably mate for life, although not much is known about the phenomenon of pair bonding between male and female. As with wolves, there is an alpha female and an alpha male in each coyote group and, generally, they are the only ones in the group to breed. Coyotes mostly breed during February or March, and give birth in April or May. Litter size varies, depending in part upon environmental conditions as well as coyote population density. Gestation averages 63 days, with an average litter size of six pups in older females. One- and two-year-old females tend to have smaller first litters, averaging three pups.

The female nurses the pups for up to two months, but starts offering regurgitated meals as early as three weeks. This form of feeding is widespread among canids, and represents an economical way of weaning young from milk to semi-solid meals. The pups mature quickly, and are fully independent at about nine months. The male coyote provides protection and food for the mother and offspring until the offspring are able to hunt for themselves.

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Coyotes certainly do humans more good than harm by helping establish balanced predator-prey populations. In the West, the long bitter war fought against the coyote as a depredator of livestock is its own issue. In some cases, the hostility toward rural coyotes that characterizes the livestock-protection issue has been transferred to the urban coyote, which is seen as a threat to free-roaming pets. Unfortunately, individual coyotes in an urban/suburban setting can, and occasionally do kill cats and small dogs. The urban coyote may also damage home gardens while searching for food. Moreover, some coyotes have lost their natural fear of humans after being fed by people over time. Additionally, coyotes, like all warm-blooded animals, may contract rabies. Coyote-to-dog transmission is a potential problem when there are populations of unvaccinated domestic dogs in a community.

Despite these potential conflicts, people live peacefully with coyotes nearby, often unaware of their presence. When one is seen, he may be passing through the yard or inspecting the garden. Tolerance and learning to live with the urban coyote seems to be the best answer, for attempts to rid areas of coyotes are as doomed to fail as the decades long effort of the federal government to control them in the West. Unless they cause a specific problem, there is no reason to worry about coyotes, and every reason to celebrate their ability to coexist in an urbanized world.

RESOLVING CONFLICTS

Poisoning, trapping and relocating urban coyotes are usually ineffective or short-term solutions to human-coyote conflicts. Poisoning is simply wrong, highly dangerous to other wildlife and pets, and potentially even children. Coyotes are often clever enough to avoid traps, and even when one animal is removed, another is likely to move in to its territory.

Minimizing risks and alternative non-lethal solutions are preferred in urban/suburban areas where there are potential coyote conflicts:

- Do not let pets out at night (coyotes are primarily nocturnal); do not leave pet food, water or food storage areas accessible to coyotes.
- Supervise pets whenever they are outdoors and make sure they are in a secure fenced area. Make your cat an indoor cat.
- Place food refuse and trash in high-quality garbage cans with tight-fitting lids; do not put your trash out at the curb until the morning of the collection.
- Pick up fallen fruit from your garden and clean bird feeding areas.
- Protect poultry or small livestock with adequate fencing and ensure that the animals are properly confined in well-built cages or pens each evening.
- Never feed coyotes!

Without question, there is no other wild animal in North America whom humans have tried so fervently to eradicate-and who has been so remarkably resistant. In the face of the most determined assaults, the coyote has survived and expanded its range into places it has not been known before. Coyotes have been pursued, brutalized, shot, poisoned, and trapped by the millions. Despite all this, coyotes are thriving and are now settling down with humans in urban/suburban areas, thereby adding a trace of the wild to the often sterile city environment.

For more information about coyotes and humane solutions to human-wildlife conflicts, call 202.452.1100, write to 2100 L Street, NW, Washington, DC 20037, or visit www.hsus.org.