

From the Canyons to the Cul-De-Sacs

Forget that home on the range—Wile E. has moved in next door

BY CARRIE ALLAN



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For many outside the Southwest, coyotes used to be the stuff of legend, captured in the animated bumbblings of Wile E. Coyote in Saturday morning cartoons or in the tall tales about Pecos Bill. Elusive and reclusive, coyotes were the inhabitants of dry lands and fertile minds, and city folk could catch a glimpse of them only on trips to the Grand Canyon and other desert areas—and only if they were lucky.

An American icon symbolizing new frontiers and tenacity, the coyote is ubiquitous on T-shirts and knickknacks sold in the Southwest, with the requisite saguaro cactus and a star-bright sky above him. But his stretched-neck howl at the moon might as well be a cry for help: The creature so celebrated in Native American

mythology for his slyness and longevity is also among the most persecuted species in the country.

And like so many animals who've traversed into foreign territory to try to survive in a shrinking natural landscape, coyotes have abandoned their old geographical haunts and entered not just the collective consciousness but the backyards of urban dwellers who, at one time, could only imagine what they looked like in the flesh.

It's not that they're not in the Southwest anymore; people in Arizona and New Mexico still encounter coyotes, in spite of the hunts that kill thousands of them every year. But people in Massachusetts and Illinois and New York and even the urban streets of the nation's capital may encounter them as

well. First spotted in Rock Creek Park in Washington, D.C., in 2004, coyotes continue to be sighted from time to time in neighborhoods around the park, says Ken Ferebee, a natural resource management specialist with the National Park Service. "Sometimes they'll be yipping and howling when a siren goes by on the nearby streets," he says.

They're likely in your neighborhood, too—or will be soon enough. And your organization may get calls from citizens concerned about their bold behavior or wolf-like appearance. Prolific and adaptable, coyotes' expansion into territories they didn't occupy in the past is due at least in part to 19th century humans' overzealous culling of wolves, who once dominated the food chain in areas where coyotes now have free rein.



As their wilderness shrinks, more coyotes are turning up in cities and suburbs, coming into contact with people, their cars, and their pets. DREAMSTIME.COM/NELSON HALE

Where the Deer and the Antelope (and the Soccer Moms) Play

In 2000, a research biologist named Stanley Gehrt, now an assistant professor at Ohio State University, was asked by Cook County Animal Control in Illinois to collect information on coyotes in urban Chicago. After receiving an increasing number of calls from citizens complaining about coyotes stalking their pets or children, shelter managers were looking for an idea of exactly how many of the animals roamed the area.

The coyote census was supposed to take a year, but it stretched to six. “Nine million people live in the greater Chicago area,” Gehrt told Ohio State University’s *Research News* in 2005. “We didn’t think very many coyotes could thrive in such a highly urbanized area. We also thought that the few animals that were causing problems were probably used to living around people.” Once they began studying the population, though, Gehrt and his team “couldn’t find an area in Chicago where there weren’t coyotes.”

That would apparently include the city’s fast food joints: Last spring, an

adult coyote wandered into a Quiznos shop in Chicago’s Loop—the second largest central business district in the country—and tried to get behind the counter to investigate the sandwiches.

On the East Coast, the howling coyote image could even appear on an “I ♥ NYC” T-shirt: In the spring of 2006, a male coyote led New York City police officers, park officials, and a crowd of ‘yote-arazzi on a chase through Central Park that lasted several days. Mayor Michael Bloomberg attempted to assuage citizens’ fears by telling the *New York Times*, “This is New York, and I would suggest the coyote may have more problems than the rest of us.”

Bloomberg may have been joking about New Yorkers’ toughness, but he was more right than he knew about conflicts between coyotes and humans: When they arise, it’s the coyotes who end up the worse for wear. Feared by sheep ranchers and farmers convinced coyotes will attack their herds, coyotes are the target of killing contests organized by towns all over the West. In Rawlins, Wyoming, an annual coyote “calling” contest—in which partici-

pants howl and yip to draw the animals near—brings hunters from all over the country. An average of 200 animals are killed during the event; these contests are now spreading to Eastern states.

But in terms of sheer numbers, these shoots have nothing on the culls organized by the wildlife services division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which estimates that its agents poison, trap, shoot, or otherwise kill more than 80,000 coyotes every year (our tax dollars at work). These hunts continue in spite of studies that seem to show that coyotes—much like skunks, feral cats, and other wild populations—instinctually compensate for higher mortality rates. In the 2005 booklet, *Coyotes in Our Midst*, authors from the Animal Protection Institute wrote that while “lethal control can create a short-term reduction of coyotes in an area, the vacuum will eventually be filled by coyotes emigrating from surrounding areas ... by shifts in the territories of neighboring packs, and by the increased reproduction of surviving coyotes.”

“Out West they shoot 90 to 100 thousand of them every single year ...” says Nicky Ratliff, executive director of the Humane Society of Carroll County in Westminster, Md. “It’s doing virtually nothing to solve the problem, and the federal government is paying bounties and rewards, and essentially it’s a waste of taxpayers’ money. One trapper I read [about] somewhere said we have trapped and hunted all the dumb coyotes, and now all the really smart ones are reproducing.”

If You Deforest It, They Will Come

Today there isn’t a state in the union—except Hawaii—where coyotes don’t live. When she first heard they’d come to her area, Ratliff was surprised and thought it would result in a lot of livestock damage, she says. But as she read more and time passed without major conflicts, she realized that while the coyotes might occasionally tangle with a sheep or goat, for the most part they’ve simply moved in quietly and settled down without causing much of a ruckus.

“They’re now considered an indig- enous species in Maryland,” Ratliff says, “which means they got here on their own feet. ... They weren’t on the East Coast until recently because the East Coast was total forest. ... But we have deforested the East Coast and so as they moved along naturally through the Midwest, they found the plains we made.”

The Western-style systematic annual killing of thousands of coyotes hasn’t been implemented in the East where Ratliff works. That’s mostly because of the nature of the conflicts: In the West, the majority tend to be between coyotes and ranchers. While most coyotes are too small to do much damage to cattle, their impact on sheep is more substantial and carries financial implications for those who make a living raising them.

On the more densely populated East Coast—and in suburban areas of the West—the majority of news-mak- ing incidents are caused by coyotes who’ve ventured out of the woods and into suburban backyards, where they’ve been known to scavenge trash, pick off the occasional outdoor family pet and, much more rarely, attack a child or adult human. Coyotes adapt to whatever envi- ronment they need to; in California, many have turned beach bum, attracted to the surf near Santa Barbara to check out the swimmers and see what snacks they’ve brought.

But common to all areas of the coun- try are the traditional lethal and inhu- mane methods used for controlling coyote populations. Snares kill coyotes by slow strangulation; leghold traps cause much suffering and often catch pets and other wildlife. Poisons are environmentally un- sound and often get eaten by nontargeted species. “Denning,” a particularly shud- der-inducing practice, involves sticking a piece of barbed wire into a den of pups and rotating it until the wire catches on a pup’s fur; the animal is then dragged out and shot or beaten to death. In an alter- nate form of denning, the coyotes’ hole is stuffed with dry branches and leaves and then set on fire, and the entrance is blocked with a rock so the animals can’t get out. The practice was federally banned

in 1979 due to public outrage, but the ban was lifted just three years later.

Don’t Let Them Get Comfortable

Humane and environmental groups are working on a variety of methods for kinder resolution of conflicts between hu- mans and coyotes. But many people have a weird bias against the critters, who aren’t exactly like other recognizable ca- nines. They’re not friendly and domestic

like dogs, they’re not as attractive as foxes, and they’re not as majestic as wolves—but they’re apparently enough like wolves to inspire a NIMBY syndrome.

“We’ve done some surveys about pub- lic attitudes to coyotes on [Cape Cod], and it’s interesting: most people are perfectly happy to have them anywhere but their own backyards,” says Robbie Fearn, direc- tor of The HSUS’s Cape Wildlife Center in Barnstable, Mass. “In fact, there are peo-

Rehabbing Coyotes: Can You? Should You?

While coyotes are sly by reputation, even their wiliness can’t always save them from a high-speed Buick. And as more of them range into populated areas, an increasing number will have unfortunate encounters with cars and humans, leaving many dead, injured, or orphaned.

Regulations regarding the handling of coyotes vary, so if your organization takes in injured ones, contact your state wildlife agency right away, says Robbie Fearn, director of The HSUS’s Cape Wildlife Center in Barnstable, Mass. In Massachusetts, Fearn’s facility is one of only a few places allowed to rehabili- tate coyotes and must follow strict guidelines: Staff can only rehabilitate pups, and must raise them as part of a litter. Single orphans would be more likely to imprint upon their human caretakers during rehabilitation, possibly leading them toward human populations after they’ve been released.

Once the Cape center has raised the pups to the point where they dis- perse naturally—usually by the fall of each year—staff contact state officials, who attach ear tags that help track the animals. State officials also decide where the coyotes can be released, avoiding areas where they could end up in someone’s backyard.

Recently, the Cape center received a male coyote pup who’d already been hand-raised by a well-meaning citizen for more than a week. Staff added him to a litter of orphaned females in hopes the girls would “wild him up,” says Fearn. It worked, but the process was tough: “He was very much imprinting on people, and we immediately separated him from any human stimulus, and he sat out in this cage and just cried for three days,” says Fearn. “It broke every- body’s heart, but even ... when we’d go in to feed him, he’d run up and basically climb your leg.”

Rehabbing coyotes, Fearn says, involves caution, substantial knowledge about physical and social needs, and great care in ensuring the animals don’t imprint on their caretakers. To keep coyotes from forming favorable impres- sions of humans, the Cape center designates only a few staff to work with them and keeps contact between the species as minimal as possible.

Many states may require euthanasia of coyotes, making the initial call to wildlife authorities even more critical, says Fearn. “It’s really awful when an orphan comes in and everyone goes, ‘Oh my god, it’s so cute,’ and everybody gets attached to that animal—and then the state says, ‘No, you have to eutha- nize that animal,’” he says. “Shelter work is hard enough without having to go through that.”

ple who will call us and say, 'I have these foxes that live in the backyard and I just love them, but could you come take the coyotes away?' Foxes are small and cute, and coyotes are just a little bit too much like the big bad wolf."

Given how adaptable coyotes are, the best advice for homeowners disturbed by their presence is to make sure the animals don't get too comfortable, says Dave Pauli, regional director of the Northern Rockies Regional Office of The Humane Society of the United States. Working with municipalities and animal shelters in parts of the country that still sometimes resemble the wild and untamed West coyotes started out in, Pauli has dealt with many complaints about the animals.

"I recently attended the Western Wildlife Damage Management confer-

ence ... and the common thought for control of coyotes was lethal control via foothold traps and shooting," says Pauli, noting that most training doesn't even address the possibility of live-trapping coyotes because people think they are too wily to be captured in live traps. "The fact is there are several people who routinely live-trap coyotes ... because we've come to understand the coyote does not have an ingrained fear of [them]; he simply has a healthy respect for anything new."

Relocation of live-trapped animals presents its own share of problems, though; creatures dropped into unknown territories must compete for resources with existing inhabitants who already know the lay of the land. They may also spread diseases that were once contained to localized populations.

Most animal control officers Pauli knows don't trap and relocate coyotes when they get calls. Instead, they first confirm the accuracy of the sighting; Pauli advises officers to bring unlabeled photos of a fox, a husky, and a coyote—and to have the caller identify which looks like the cause of their concerns. Then officers advise homeowners to deal with the elements that may be drawing the coyotes to their yards in the first place. They tell them to change their habits if they've traditionally fed pets outdoors, to try to scare the coyotes off when they encounter them, and, ultimately, to simply enjoy the music the 'yotes make and the rodent control benefits they bring.

While humane-minded citizens may be perfectly fine with the coyote skirting the edges of their yards, their neighbors may not—and may be more inclined to show their fear with a gun, poison, or a lethal trap. When coyotes get too close to human environs, it's best for all concerned to discourage their encroachment.

Field services officers who get complaints about suburban coyotes should recommend that people keep their smaller pets—such as cats and small dogs—indoors, says Pauli. They should not feed their pets outside (or if they do, they should supervise the feeding and not leave food on the porch). They should pick up any fallen fruits that a coyote

might find tasty; make sure garbage cans are securely closed; and make sure their female dogs are spayed, since a female dog in heat can attract other canines.

People who encounter a coyote in the flesh should not run but instead make frightening noises, try to appear larger, and chase off any Wile Es snooping around the area. "You always want them to find people a little startling," says Fearn.

Beneficial Predation

Members of the public may find it easier to practice tolerance and caution around coyotes if animal control officers educate them about the benefits of having the plains canine around. While Gehrt's *Urban Coyote Ecology and Management* study in the Chicago area found that coyotes were everywhere, it uncovered few negative encounters between coyotes and humans. According to the study, the bulk of coyotes' diets tended to be made up of rodents. (The team found increases in rodent populations in areas where coyotes had been removed.) By setting up security cameras at nest sites, team members also found that coyotes were fond of stealing Canada goose eggs—which should mollify those who see the proliferating geese as "nuisance" animals.

In fact, Ratliff says, the appearance of coyotes in new areas may help restore the balance to ecosystems where other predators have all but disappeared. "People complain about groundhogs all the time, white-tailed deer all the time. People complain they can't grow anything in the yard because of the rabbits," she says. "So we finally have a natural predator that will take care of all these other 'nuisance' animals. I don't like the term 'nuisance animal' because, well, you could argue *we're* the nuisance. But of the animals we feel are too plentiful around our homes, the coyote will take care of a lot of that."

Though the suburbanized East Coast will likely continue to generate more tales of stolen pets than angry farmers, Ratliff herself works in a fairly rural area where most responsible farmers know

Resources

Programs

Urban Wildlife Sanctuary Program, The Humane Society of the United States, 202-452-1100, humanesociety.org/wildlife

Cape Wildlife Center, The Humane Society of the United States, 508-362-0111, humanesociety.org/wildlife/cape_wildlife_center

Books/Studies

Coyotes in Our Midst: Coexisting with an Adaptable and Resilient Carnivore, The Animal Protection Institute, api4animals.org

Urban Coyote Ecology and Management, The Cook County, Illinois, Coyote Project, ohioline.osu.edu/b929/pdf/b929.pdf

Suburban Howls: Tracking the Eastern Coyote in Urban Massachusetts, Jonathan Way, Dog Ear Publishing. Way's website: easterncoyotersearch.com



Most states strictly regulate coyote rehabilitation. Usually, only juveniles can be rehabilitated, and only when raised as part of a litter. JOHN HARRISON

that good husbandry practices will keep the coyote away from their herds, she says. They are less likely to have trouble with coyotes if they pick up any placentas left from animal births and any dead animals—rather than leaving them out to attract scavengers—and if they keep their fields well-trimmed so coyotes have less cover in crop rows.

What’s more, she says, if a pair settles into an area and isn’t causing harm to cattle or sheep, it’s wise to let these territorial animals be. “If I have a sheep farm and I have coyotes that aren’t bothering my sheep, I would be an idiot to do anything to those two coyotes, because they’re going to keep all the rest of them away from my farm—and the rest might not be as sheep-friendly,” says Ratliff.

The species’ adaptability, resourcefulness, and survival skills aren’t lost on the farmers in Ratliff’s area, some of whom have even come to appreciate them. One farmer used to use a spotting scope to watch a pair of coyotes and their pups from his porch. When he relayed his ex-

periences to Ratliff, she asked if he was disturbed by their presence. “He says, ‘Oh no, they walk right past my cows giving birth, they walk past my calves, they don’t hurt a thing. I love watching them out there; they’re so entertaining,’” Ratliff recalls.

Still, Ratliff jokes, coyotes like cats more than ALF, the kitty-munching alien of sitcom fame. (They also are very fond of cantaloupe, she says, noting that since coyotes can’t “thump” a melon to judge its ripeness, they’ll frequently bite multiple fruits until they find the one that meets their standards.) To minimize the risk of attacks, people need only be responsible about the care of their families and pets. If everyone in the area started sticking their babies out on their back steps and leaving them there unattended, Ratliff says, she might be more inclined to worry.

Fearn notes that a colleague of his likes to say that when you let your pets outside, they become part of the food chain—both as potential predators and potential prey. And while coyotes do

have a taste for cats, they’re also often scape-yoted for feline disappearances caused by other, usually human, phenomena, says Fearn. “The perception is that anytime a cat or a small dog disappears, a coyote ate it—when more likely it was hit by a car or someone else has taken it in,” Fearn says. “There just aren’t enough coyotes actually to be eating as many cats as disappear.”

A saying out West holds that when all other life has been wiped off the planet, only cockroaches and coyotes will still be around. And while coyotes may no longer symbolize the Southwest, they’re more American than ever now. Just ask the residents of the nation’s capital, where, a few miles from the White House, diplomats driving home from their embassies and local citizens out jogging in Rock Creek Park may be lucky enough to catch an earful of their singing. While the Wild West may be a thing of the past, the coyote remains a living emblem of this country’s former wilderness we haven’t yet been able to do in. **AS**