

Ghost Dogs

Coyotes are coming out from the shadows, making bolder moves into urban environments. It's time to put some of the myths about them behind us.

By Kerry Banks

It is 11:00 p.m. on a hot August night in Vancouver, and I am sitting on the front porch when I spot them approaching on my left — two coyotes moving up our street on opposite sidewalks, gliding silently through the amber glow of the sodium-vapour lights.

It is quite possible that other people are still up and about, but these two coyotes show no concern. They go past me, moving in lockstep, ears up and tails down. It does not appear they are aware of my presence, so I cough and the one closest to me nonchalantly turns its head and glances back without breaking stride. At the corner, this coyote stops as the other makes a sharp right turn and crosses the road to join him. They then resume their coordinated sweep of the neighbourhood.

Coyote experts I have spoken with say I likely witnessed an alpha pair of coyotes patrolling the perimeter of their territory. Some may find it unsettling to hear that their house and family pets live within the home territory of a pack of coyotes, but many urban dwellers in Canada fall into this category today. Coyotes have now colonized virtually every major urban centre in North America. Once confined to the western plains and the deserts of the southwest, their range now extends as far north as Alaska and as far south as Central America. They dwell on the West Coast and the East Coast and nearly everywhere in between. They have accomplished this feat while facing relentless persecution, a testimony to their keen intelligence and remarkable adaptability.



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hen coyotes move into an urban setting, they usually remain wary of people and lead unobtrusive lives. Their routine is to sleep in parks or patches of vegetation during the day, stealing out as twilight falls to hunt small rodents and rabbits. Sometimes referred to as “ghost dogs” because of their nocturnal habits and the stealthy manner in which they navigate through cities, flitting from shadow to shadow, coyotes survive by being invisible while living among us.

But recently coyotes in some parts of Canada have been shedding their cloak of invisibility, showing less fear of humans and engaging in belligerent behaviour, even going so far as to snatch up small dogs in broad daylight while the owners have them on leashes. Or, as was the case in 2016 in the seaside town of Gibsons, B.C., steal a poodle from inside a quilt store.

Exactly why this is occurring and what is the best strategy to combat it has become a contentious issue. In the past, coyotes that displayed any sign of aggression with humans were routinely killed. Today, the move to develop green spaces in cities and encourage wildlife to propagate has changed that equation. Now many citizens want their cities to adopt non-lethal methods of control, which may not be wise.

The idea that we should have to accommodate coyotes is a recent development in North America. Once wolves were removed from the scene, the American government turned its full attention on eliminating coyotes

It was thought, albeit incorrectly, that their diet was composed of big game species and livestock from farms, such as sheep and calves. In a nine-year period between 1947 and 1956, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service slaughtered millions of coyotes in the western United States, using blanket poisoning. Even today, tens of thousands are killed annually in the U.S. and Canada, many of them dispatched by government-employed aerial gunners.



In addition to their natural cunning, two unique genetic traits have helped coyotes resist all efforts to eradicate them. When under duress, they can boost their reproductive rate by breeding at an earlier age and giving birth to larger litters, from six to as many as 16 cubs. They will also fragment their pack sizes, splitting off into singles and pairs to enhance their survival rates.

Shelley Alexander, a professor of geography at the University of Calgary and a veteran coyote researcher, says that killing coyotes is counterproductive as a control measure because it removes adults from the population and the guidance they give young ones. “You can end up with a situation where most of your coyotes are uneducated, immature teenagers.”

Although no longer demonized as they were in the past when *Scientific American* magazine referred to coyotes as the “Original Bolshevik” and Mark Twain called them “spiritless and cowardly,” coyotes remain a polarizing species. People tend to either love them or hate them. A surprising number of folks fall in the second camp. In 2001, residents in the Chicago region were asked to rank nuisance wildlife according to the level of threat to human health and safety. The coyote ranked number one even though no coyote attacks on humans had been recorded in the area.

In fact, there have been only two incidents in recorded history in which coyotes have killed a human: in 1981, a three-year-old girl was dragged from the driveway of her house in Glendale, Calif. Her father gave chase and drove the coyote off, but the girl died from her wounds.

The other case took place in 1990, when a 19-year-old folk singer was fatally mauled by a pack of coyotes on a popular Cape Breton hiking trail. In the second case, the attacking animals were coyotes, but coywolves, hybrids produced by the interbreeding of coyotes and eastern wolves. Coywolves are larger than their western counterparts, with bigger skulls, jaws and teeth.

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espite the fact that coyotes live in such close proximity to us, biologists have only recently begun to closely investigate these misunderstood animals. In 2005, Alexander headed up a seven-year probe of Calgary’s coyote population, the first study of its kind in Canada. Among the questions the researchers tried to answer was how much of the urban coyote’s diet was composed of pet animals, whose vulnerability is often blamed for boosting urban coyote populations. However, after examining 500 scat samples, Alexander says the research team found traces of what would be considered pets in just six samples.

In Vancouver, the first coyote sightings were reported in 1987. Today, some 200 to 300 animals inhabit the city and suburbs. The goal of Vancouver’s Coexisting with Coyotes program, run by the Stanley Park Ecology Society, is to reduce conflict between coyotes, people and pets. Established in 2001, the society tries to raise coyote awareness through an information and reporting hotline, public signage, a website and school programs. Vancouverites seem to be more tolerant of coyotes than residents in many other cities. A survey conducted in 2015 showed that 82 per cent of respondents categorized their attitude toward coyotes as neutral or positive. Only 13 per cent reported negative attitudes.

Perhaps the coyotes in Vancouver are more laid-back, too. Writer and magazine editor Roberta Staley recalls coming upon a young coyote one spring afternoon while running the wooded trails of Vancouver’s Pacific Spirit Park. “He looked at me and started jogging. We ran together for 15 minutes,” Staley says. “I stayed about 20 feet behind him and never felt threatened. We connected somehow — it felt natural.”

Even so, the threat level posed by coyotes is still often widely exaggerated by Vancouverites, says Greg Hart, urban wildlife coordinator for the Stanley Park Ecology Society. “People generally estimate that they weigh about 45 kilograms, when in fact even the largest males never get much past 20 kilos.” And then there are those who think they can help coyotes by feeding them, a tactic that usually only guarantees death for the animal.

All programs designed to reduce conflict with coyotes stress the importance of not feeding them. Offering food to coyotes lessens their fear of people, as does running away from them. Once this happens, it is hard to reinstall fear in the animals, which leads them to become bolder. That makes it all the more important to report more brazen coyote activity so that if someone is feeding them, that person can be approached by authorities and ordered to stop.

According to Stan Gehrt, a wildlife biologist who has been studying coyotes for the last 17 years as part of the Urban Coyote Research Program in Cook County, Ill., all the cases in which coyotes were involved in aggressive incidents in his group’s study are

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a result of being fed by humans. A survey of 142 reported attacks on people between 1960 and 2006 revealed that 70 per cent occurred on or next to the victim's residence and at least 30 per cent near a site of prior intentional or unintentional human feeding.

Gehrt's work in the Chicago area (where he claims at least 2,000 coyotes live), aided by high-definition night video and radio collars, is providing the most detailed look at urban coyote behaviour to date. Studying these wily creatures, Gehrt says, is a humbling experience because they constantly challenge your assumptions.

"We underestimate their abilities. For example, after the first night of study, I realized I had seriously underestimated my budget."

The first coyote that Gehrt tagged, traversed five Chicago municipalities in one night, crossing busy roads and slipping past people unnoticed. Gehrt now knows that urban coyotes may range as far as 130 square kilometres in one evening, covering vast fragmented territories.

Another assumption that he initially held — that coyotes would be found in only the remote areas of the city — was also demolished by the facts. Some live in the most developed sections of downtown Chicago, in city parks, apartment building complexes or industrial parks. One GPS-collared coyote raised a litter of five cubs in a concrete den in the parking lot of Soldier Field, home of the NFL's Chicago Bears.

Interestingly, none of the hundreds of Crittercam clips collected by Gehrt and his colleagues have revealed any evidence that Chicago's coyotes are regularly hunting cats or dogs, a commonly cited concern. Analysis of more than 1,400 scats found that "the most common food items were small rodents (42 per cent), fruit (23 per cent), deer (22 per cent), and rabbit (18 per cent)." Only about two per cent of the scats had human garbage and just 1.3 per cent had evidence of cats, a similar percentage to Alexander's Calgary study.

Colleen St. Clair, a biologist at the University of Alberta and the organizer of the Edmonton Urban Coyote Project, says her group has focused on learning more about coyote diet, movement and habitat selection, as well as the knowledge and perceptions of residents about these animals. Wildlife officials in Edmonton receive several thousand coyote-related calls per year. St. Clair says troublesome encounters are on the rise. Studies by grad student Margaret Murray indicate the problem may originate with compost. "Compost — the gateway drug to bad coyotes," St. Clair notes.

Compost heaps in Edmonton provide an easy means for coyotes to scavenge for food, but the organic material is full of microtoxins that have a cumulative effect on health, weakening immune systems and making the animals susceptible to maladies such as mange, a skin disease caused by parasites. The evidence Murray has gathered indicates that these diseased coyotes are more active during the day, have a greater likelihood of spending time in residential and commercial areas of the city and are consuming more human food, three factors that would increase the odds of being involved in incidents with people.

One conclusion gleaned from the studies, St. Clair says, was that lethal management should remain in the tool kit because "it increases the level of security." However, most urban wildlife managers today are dealing with such conflicts through public education rather than by managing individual coyotes. That approach has contributed to making large urban areas into refuges for coyotes, since they are less likely to be killed or removed in cities than in rural areas.

In Vancouver, John Gray says officials keep tabs on the behaviour of problem coyotes and will take lethal measures if things escalate, as they did in 2015, when officials shot and killed a coyote that had been threatening young children.

For non-lethal coyote mitigation, people are now trying everything from firing paintballs and Super Soaker water guns at coyotes, to clanging pots and pans and installing motion-sensor lights. Whether or not these measures prove effective, most experts contend that urban residents can safely coexist with coyotes when knowledge and respect replaces irrational fear.

In the final analysis, urbanites will have to come to some sort of understanding and find some equilibrium with the knowledge that we now have an active predator that lives among us, one that has never required our acceptance to thrive. The relationship between city residents and the ghost dogs is still young and evolving, and no one knows for sure where it might lead.

What we do know, says Stan Gehrt, is that the coyote isn't leaving. "Even if there is no green space, coyotes will figure out how to exploit the urban downtown," he says. "They are going to be successful in any city no matter how the landscape is configured." 🐾