

Sunday Column – Learning to Live with coyotes
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We have lived in close proximity to coyotes for more than 100 years. With the precipitous decline in wolf and bear populations, the coyote expanded his numbers and his territory to at least partially fill the void left by these predators. Coyotes are now found all across the continental United States and in virtually every ecosystem. They actually play an important role in our urban ecosystem and would likely be missed if we wiped them out entirely.

I recently saw a fuzzy picture of a coyote, similar in quality to that of surveillance footage of a convenience store robber, posted on my neighborhood page. As you might expect, this generated a high volume of responses ranging from, “I will shoot them if they come into my yard”, to “maybe they...will take care of the squirrels, which are really becoming too numerous.”

The portrayal of coyotes by citizens and the media, and the reality brought to light through a number of research projects, are distinctly at odds. There are documented attacks by coyotes on pets and humans. However, there is a great deal of misconception as to the how common these attacks are and the level of risk coyotes actually pose to our urban way of life. In fact, as indicated by the response above, these animals perform an important service.

The “go to” solution for a coyote sighting is typically trap and kill. Yet, similar to what we find with “feral” cats, attempts to kill coyotes results in larger litters and interlopers moving in to fill the void. Studies show that a sudden decrease in population results in still more of these animals coming into our neighborhoods the following season.

Small mammals are the primary food source for coyotes, but they are also instrumental in controlling the growth of the deer population by taking down fawns. Hardly anyone likes to think of a fawn being killed by a coyote but this is part of the circle of life and without this, deer populations tend to grow out of proportion to food supply. The resulting disease and starvation would be a worse fate.

Coyotes provide a similar function in relation to Canada geese whose populations have increased dramatically in our parks and golf courses. There are those who will appreciate the coyote’s role in reducing the number of feral cats living in our communities. In fact, one study demonstrated how a song bird population increased because of the emerging coyote population.

Citizens complain to local government when they see a coyote in their neighborhood and they expect an immediate response. Animal control agencies oblige by hiring trappers to come in and rid the neighborhood of this menace. It is a seductive quick fix and gets citizens off their backs for a season. But if more coyote pups are born and survive in the following year, what have we really accomplished?

What got a lot of folks in Columbus excited recently is a pet dog who got caught in a leg hold trap placed in a local park. These types of traps are used because other means have not proven successful. The problem with all traps is that they are indiscriminate, meaning they catch non-target wildlife and pets. Other than the emotional trauma they may cause to whoever gets tangled up in one, these traps are designed to cause minimal physical damage.

Unfortunately, municipal governments get grief no matter what they do. No one wants to think of their pet, or of a harmless deer, getting caught in one of these traps. But we also insist we want the coyotes to go away.

The research shows that the only real solution to this dilemma is on us citizens. We feed coyotes inadvertently and sometimes on purpose. They are rewarded as they enter our yards and become habituated to our presence. Without these enticements they are inclined to stay away from us and our pets. In cities like Denver and Chicago, citizens are being educated so they may do their part to help keep coyotes focused on their appropriate role in our urban ecosystems.

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