

Coyotes: Keep your Pet Safe

Coyotes have been making the news a lot lately and for good reason. It should be no surprise however that close encounters of the wild canine kind are happening more frequently. With the approaching mating season for coyotes upon us we may see them even more frequently through the next few months. The much-maligned coyotes are a reality here in our province and, due to the expansion of suburbia, they're showing up in the backyards we share with them. Knowing a bit about their behavior and ecology will help dispel unnecessary alarm.



Mating Season

This time of year coyotes can be more visible because of the impending mating season. With Valentine's Day fast approaching, they have romance on their minds. The problem is, they cover a lot of territory when looking for mates and when they are already so close to our backyards it is not a stretch to begin to see them more in our neighborhoods.

Just like humans, the dating game is expensive but we're not talking chocolates, wine and roses here. Trying to find a mate and the resulting pregnancy causes coyotes to need more food than usual.

Newly pregnant females require extra caloric input. Both males and females hunt, but the males take over most of the grocery shopping when mom is pregnant. Coyotes will eat almost anything from rabbits to rodents, stuff from our composters and green bins, Persians to Poodles. It is not uncommon in the Midwestern United States, where coyotes originated, to hear about pets being taken by coyotes. It shouldn't be surprising if we start to hear similar stories here.



Pregnancy in coyotes lasts about 60 to 65 days. The female will give birth to four to nine blind and helpless pups in late April or May. As the pups are weaned, hunting

intensifies for all the new mouths to feed. It will take five to six weeks for the pups to grow and develop enough to venture outside the den.

Adapting to Our/Their Environment

Coyotes are quick studies when it comes to survival. They have spread across North America despite all attempts to exterminate them through bounties and hunting. They are now adapting to the suburban habitat as a result of human encroachment. Coyotes have altered their lifestyles and their diets, moving from the backwoods to the backyards and finding opportunity there as well.



Coyotes may hunt individually, so you may just see one, but they also form packs for territorial defense and will also hunt in packs as well. Eastern Coyotes are somewhat genetically distinct from the Western Coyote population, having bred with wolves in their

migration to the Maritimes, however their behaviours are similar. Roughly half of all urban coyotes live in territorial packs that consist of five to six adults and their pups that were born that year. These urban packs establish territories of about ten to 15 square kilometres.

The coyotes that don't belong to a pack can roam as loners throughout the 'burbs'. A coyote on its own has to cover more territory than a pack, and studies have shown these individuals can range over as much as 80 square kilometres in one night. Tracking studies of these coyotes in the Midwestern United States has shown them covering multiple city areas in one night.

Fears and Facts

It seems, with each coyote report we hear, the Eastern Coyote gets bigger and badder. While the Eastern Coyote is larger than its western predecessor, the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources statistics from trapping show average weights between 13 to 22 kg. To put that in perspective, an average Labrador Retriever weighs about 35 kg.

Are they dangerous? Certainly to our small dogs, cats, and smaller wildlife such as raccoons and rodents they are a threat. We have seen some aggressive behavior towards humans in some areas as well. When habituated to humans, coyotes are emboldened and may be aggressive. Statistics record 24 attacks on humans in Canada between 1998 and 2008 and, of course, we are all aware of the recent encounters here in Nova Scotia. The key here is that habituated animals are dangerous, as many wild animals are, when in proximity to people.

It's up to us to prevent coyotes from becoming "nuisance animals." This translates into keeping all possible food items inside and/or out of reach — pet food, leftovers on the grill, composters — and your Shih Tzu.

Protecting your Pet

Coyotes are here to stay, but we can't live in fear everyday, and there are lots of things we can do limit encounters and protect our pets and ourselves. If you have a small dog you must take extra precaution when, where and how you let your dog out. A small dog in a yard with coyotes in proximity is a meal waiting to be eaten. A sturdy fence can help but is not foolproof, as a coyote can easily climb over a fence if motivated, but it is at least a deterrent. There are roll bars that can be added to the top of a fence to prevent unwanted guests from coming in. Keeping cats indoors is prudent for a lot of reasons, most importantly because cats are particularly prone to becoming coyote food.

Coyotes like all canines are observant and adaptive. They can learn the daily schedules of people and their pets. If you let your dog out every evening at the same time a coyote doesn't need a reminder on his BlackBerry to be there on time. This is true of other predators as well such as foxes and lynx or bobcat. So if you are in a coyote populated area you may want to pay close attention and take precautions for your pet. Keep them close to you, and preferably on a leash, when going for walks. If you see coyotes in your area, let other pet owners know and inform the Department of Natural Resources

Remember winter is the breeding season for coyotes when movement and activity increases. Through encroachment and adaptation they can alter their food choices and this time of year they have increased demand, so we may be seeing more of them. Be aware and be safe. Check out the Department of Natural Resources website for more information on our Eastern Coyote and safety tips.

<http://www.gov.ns.ca/natr/wildlife/nuisance/coyotes-faq.asp>