

YYCoyote

Cunning *Canis latrans* is everywhere. And here's everything you ever wanted to know about the urban coyote: the back-alley scavenging, the spine-tingling yipping, the occasional predation of pets and—rarer still—the conflicts with us, the wily creature's uneasy human neighbours.

By Jennifer Allford

Gertie is lucky to be alive. The tiny, three-pound Yorkshire terrier is recovering from multiple puncture wounds after being snatched from her Briar Hill front yard by a coyote a few weeks ago. Fortunately for Gertie, her owner saw the attack and chased the coyote down the street and around the corner, before the animal finally dropped the dog and went off to find lunch elsewhere.

Little Jack wasn't so lucky. A couple of summers ago, the dachshund was running behind his bicycle-riding owner through Nose Hill Park when the low-slung pooch crossed paths with a coyote. His owner only realized Jack was in trouble when he heard the dog howl. By the time he rode back, it was too late.

Every year, pet owners report a handful of coyote attacks on dogs—"maybe four or five," says Ed Pirogowicz, a provincial Fish and Wildlife officer based in Calgary. Of those, several hounds—usually the smaller ones—are killed. Pirogowicz says it's "unusual" for coyotes to attack humans and there has never been a serious coyote attack on a person in the city. But there have been incidents over the years: a child was bitten in Confederation Park, a man was bitten at an industrial site where people had been leaving food lying around and coyotes have been known to grab lunch bags and chase runners in communities such as Sunnyside and near Nose Hill Park.

Like magpies, beavers and porcupines, coyotes are wild creatures living in our midst but, unlike magpies, we respond to them with equal parts of fear and wonder. Their dog-like *but not quite* appearance can startle us when we spot them in alleys or green spaces; and we can quickly go from startled to alarmed if we find one in the backyard. From a distance, a coyote looks like a scruffy, medium-sized dog, but up close their yellow eyes, narrow, pointy snout and black-tipped tail give them away as *Canis latrans*, literally "barking dog."

They are afraid of humans and largely keep out of our way—in a recent article about the thriving numbers of urban coyotes in North America, *The Economist* referred to them as "the ghosts of the cities." When they do emerge, pets and children are at higher risk of an encounter because they're smaller. Still, it's important to keep perspective, says Shelley Alexander, an associate professor of geography at the University of Calgary. "The numbers of children who die from consuming household chemicals are astronomical compared to the incidences



Canis Latransit



Photo illustrations by Danae Thompson



Canis larambla

**You
say coyote,
I say coyote.**
*We favour the three-
syllable Spanish pro-
nunciation, derived
from the Aztec word
cōyotl, meaning
“trickster.”*

of kids getting bit by a coyote,” says Alexander, who has studied coyotes, their behaviour and their movements across the landscape for more than 20 years. In 2006 she started The Calgary Coyote Project to examine regional coyote ecology and look at their conflicts with people.

She and her U of C colleague Michael Quinn reviewed all the print media reports of coyote encounters across Canada from 1998 to 2010. They found that there has been, on average, three coyote “events” a year across the country that have resulted in an injury to a person—a bite or a scratch. That compares to about half a million dog bites annually. “The incidence is incredibly low,” says Alexander. (A fatal attack on a young woman on a Cape Breton hiking trail in 2009 involved animals that are perhaps more wolf-like than the coyotes we have here—Alexander is careful to call them “coyote-like canids.”)

Since January 2012, operators at the City of Calgary 311 “Coyote Hotline” have recorded nearly 2,000 coyote sightings within the city limits. Many more sightings, probably most, aren’t officially reported but just ask around and you’ll hear plenty: The mom whose three little daughters think “it’s cool” to see coyotes from the safety of the back seat. The dad who “freaked out” when his kid said coyotes lived near the school. Then there’s the cyclist who was thrilled to see

coyote pups scramble off a city pathway one morning: “I love seeing wild things in the city.”

But no one loves seeing coyotes being aggressive toward humans and, occasionally, Fish and Wildlife has to put down a coyote or two. Pirogowicz says in this recent case, where Gertie was attacked and lived to bark the tale, there’s not much to do but advise dog owners—especially those living with little mutts near big parks—to build six-foot fences and be careful. “Coyotes are all over the place,” he says. “I basically tell people there is no such thing as removing a coyote; you just replace the coyote because another one is just going to move into its place.” He estimates there are 400 to 500 coyotes in the city and he suggests that if the ones in your neighbourhood aren’t causing any problems, to just leave them alone and learn to live with them.

“They are largely living in the remnants of green spaces,” says Alexander. “Then they foray around into the neighbourhoods, and where there is an attractant they take advantage of it.” An “attractant” can be anything from garbage or Fido’s kibble in the yard to sloppy compost bins, birdseed or crab apples left lying on the ground. (In one instance, a woman in the southwest neighbourhood of Strathcona watched a coyote climb her crab-apple tree to eat the rosy fruit.)

Sometimes, those attractants are people—either misguided or too young to know better—who are feeding the coyotes.

If they get habituated to human food—whether it’s Fruit Roll-Ups fed through a school fence or garbage left lying around—coyotes can lose their natural fear of humans and become more adventurous in the hunt for food. “There is an escalation that you see in these events,” says Alexander. “Animals reported in the garbage, animals reported in backyards, attacking pets and then you end up with something more significant happening.” In every case in Canada where someone has been injured in an interaction with a coyote, the animal was accustomed to eating food provided by humans.

In Nose Hill and other big parks there is plenty of their own natural nosh: mice, weasels, white-tail deer, gophers, Canada geese and native berries. “But if you get them into a smaller park area like Arbour Lake you are going to see them potentially accessing food in the neighbourhood, so you have to be more vigilant,” Alexander says. The city’s new black garbage bins have reduced the trash buffet, which in turn has “cut down on the problem of coyotes making the back alleys part of their regular circuit,” says Pirogowicz.

But if a coyote shows up around your house, you need to take some steps: “Act big,” make a lot of noise (bang pots and pans, for example) and maybe wave a stick until it leaves the area. Then, call 311 to report the encounter. If you find a den under your porch or you see a coyote eating garbage in the alley, skip the noisemaking—pick up little kids and pets, back away (never run) and make the call.

“It is very situation-specific,” says Alexander. “Coyotes are on average about 35 pounds so they aren’t a threat to a full-grown adult. But there may be issues where some coyotes become very bold and more aggressive or they are protecting a resource that you’ve walked into.”

Coyotes, which typically live 10 to 14 years in the wild, excel at adapting to their environment, and can find food and shelter pretty much anywhere, which is why they’ve survived in North America for a million years. While their first choice for a den would be a south-facing slope with a nice view near some water in the wild, coyotes have had to get creative in building dens as the city has grown around them; they’ve been

removed from under a homeowner’s deck near Fish Creek and beneath a garden shed in Coventry Hills. Another den, located under a small utility building at Shagnappi Golf Course, led to cubs frolicking on the fairways.

In Calgary’s big parks, you can often hear coyotes’ distinctive, high-pitched yip-yipping. “Sometimes they are communicating to others that they have something to eat, sometimes it’s an alarm signalling to another coyote that somebody is in the area and sometimes they do it because it’s fun,” says Alexander. “There are a whole bunch of reasons why they would vocalize.”

Whatever the reason, coyote parties tend to stop dog walkers in their tracks and send them back the other way—dogs firmly leashed. You and your dog are at the highest risk for bumping into a coyote April through June when they’re having pups (monogamous pairs usually produce four to eight pups per litter), and then again in September and October when the young’uns start heading out on their own. Coyotes are territorial and they will come out to protect their turf, and their babies, from wandering dogs.

“There is this mythology that coyotes come and lure the dogs away,” says Alexander. “The evidence is dogs are chasing coyotes and getting into attacks, versus coyotes coming out and attacking big dogs around their owners.” She says big dogs usually survive these encounters, but little dogs don’t. (A note to the cat people: If your kitty doesn’t come home in the morning, don’t be too quick to blame a coyote. Alexander says owls have been known to take their fair share of cats off the city streets under the cover of night).

While urban coyotes hunt throughout the day, Alexander suggests being extra vigilant at dusk or dawn: “Certainly it’s easier for a predator to take something like a dog during those times because you’re not as aware of what’s going on, nor is your pet.”

When you’re around coyotes—in the alleys, parks or anywhere in between—think like you do when you go hiking, Alexander suggests. “They are wild animals. Try to become educated about the animal’s behaviours and understand the situation. The appropriate response is usually to remain calm and move around it.”

Even though coyotes can look menacing—it’s those yellow eyes—Alexander says instead of being fearful, we should try to respect these “brilliant” animals. “They survived the ice ages, the arrival of the dire wolf. They are a true survivor,” she says. “We should think of coyotes as a symbol of our North American heritage of being able to endure, not as a pest on the landscape.” **S**

HOW to co-exist with coyotes

■ Report encounters—**call 311**

- Store garbage, compost, pet food and bird seed so coyotes can’t get at it.
- Clean up fallen fruit from fruit trees all year round.
- Never feed coyotes and don’t approach them.
- Put your dog on a leash when you’re walking through areas with coyote activity and during the denning season (April-June) and when pups leave the den (September-October).
- Stay away from den sites. Coyotes will attack dogs that run into the den-site area.
- Watch for changes in coyote behaviour. If you see them more or hear them more or if they are coming closer than before, report changes.
- Chase coyotes away if they’re in or near your yard. Act “big,” make a lot of noise, bang pots and pans, wave a stick until it leaves the area. If you see them under the porch or eating garbage in the alley, skip the noisemaking—pick up little kids and pets, walk away (never run) and call 311.
- Be extra vigilant walking your dog at dusk or dawn.
- Learn more about living with coyotes here: rockies.ca/coyotes

COYOTE study in city parks

Researchers in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Calgary are catching coyotes with rubber-coated traps, putting radio collars on them and releasing them to help understand where and how coyotes move and how a gastrointestinal parasite is passed from coyotes to dogs in parks around Calgary.

Dogs can get the tapeworm from eating rodents, which pick it up through coyote scat. The tapeworm doesn’t hurt dogs, but if people are infected, it can cause damage to the liver. It’s part of a study between the U of C and the City of Calgary, examining how domestic animals, wildlife and people get along in urban environments.

wcm.ucalgary.ca/coyote/



Canis lamallrat