

Hello all,

For those who don't know me, I am a wildlife rehabber living in Altadena. John Howell of the Conservancy contacted my neighbor regarding concerns about the coyotes living in our towns and cities.

Firstly, I would like to thank you all for your concern for our local wildlife. Coyotes are a vital part of our ecosystem and are often unfairly maligned, so I appreciate your efforts to help these beautiful animals.

However, the situation is complex, so bear with me as I do my best to explain. There are several key issues that I need to explain to that everything makes sense.

First I would like to address the common misconception that the coyotes living in our urban and suburban areas do not belong here and need to go live in the wild. People tend to think, when they see coyotes in the city or suburbs, that they have come in from the forest and gotten lost, or been displaced, and need to be "returned". However, what has actually happened is that humans have moved into coyote territory, and the coyotes have simply not moved out. Instead, they have adapted to an urban lifestyle (when I use the term "urban" I mean both urban and suburban) and have gotten very skilled at living in our cities. They have been with us as long as we have lived here, there are just times when we are more likely to see them. The preferred food source for coyotes is rodents, and rodent populations tend to be larger than usual around human populations. Therefore, coyotes can live very happily in the city, and are a key part of our urban ecosystem as they help keep rodent populations in check. We often see coyotes around golf courses and parks, and think it is because those areas are more "natural". In fact coyotes hang out at those areas because parks often have open trash containers, which attract rats, and on golf courses, the open greens attract gophers and ground squirrels. So, coyotes in the city are not lost, displaced, or living in an area that is not hospitable to them. They have been born and brought up here, and would be as lost and confused in "the wild" as any human city dweller would be if suddenly snatched up and dumped in the wilderness.

The second key element to understanding coyote populations is the concept of carrying capacity. The carrying capacity of any area is the amount of animal populations of each species that the land can support, based on availability of food, water, shelter, denning/nesting areas, etc. When any area reaches carrying capacity, new animals entering or born into the area have to disperse elsewhere in order to survive. In wild areas, animals will disperse into adjacent wild areas. Coyotes born in more urban areas will disperse into other adjacent urban areas. An urban-born coyote will not disperse into a wild area, and it is very rare for a wild-born coyote to move into an urban area. If there is nowhere for them to disperse, they will die, either from starvation or predation by other animals. In times when resources are limited in any area, coyotes respond with changes in breeding behavior. Fewer animals breed and litters are smaller. Conversely, when the amount of resources suddenly increases, more animals breed and litters are larger. The concept of carrying capacity applies equally to wild and urban areas.

So, by understanding carrying capacity, we can see that moving a population of coyotes from one area to another does not help them; it only creates an imbalance in the ecosystem. The area that the coyotes are moved to is now past carrying capacity, and the area they have been removed from has increased resources. The animals moved, who are now in an unfamiliar environment, will either attempt to return to their familiar territory - urban areas - or will die due to an inability to find food in an unfamiliar environment, or from being eaten by another animal. The sudden increase in resources resulting from moving animals out of an area, will cause the animals living in that area to increase their numbers. Therefore, overall populations of both areas remain the same.

Despite the overall stability of the coyote populations in urban areas, there are times when we see them a lot more often. These times sometimes coincide with times of environmental stressors, such as the recent lack of water in the area. This will lead coyotes to be out and around more frequently, and during times of day when we are more likely to see them. Again, the case is not so much that wild coyotes are coming into cities in search of water, it's that the coyotes already living in the area have become more visible, and are likely to be more bold in their search for food and water. We are also more likely to see coyotes in areas where food is available during the day, such as alleyways behind restaurants where trash is likely to be edible, around feral cat feeding colonies, and in neighborhoods where people leave pets or pet food outside during the day.

The other times we see coyotes is when they are desperate. Usually this is because they are starving, and this is usually because they are injured or ill. Commonly, we see coyotes with mange in urban areas and around parks. This is a human-caused problem. The pathogens which cause mange are present in the environment, but a healthy coyote can easily throw off exposure to mange. However, a coyote with a suppressed immune system will catch mange very easily. Urban coyotes often have suppressed immune systems due to secondary poisoning from rodent poison. Someone puts out poison to kill the rats, the rats eat the poison, the coyotes eat the rats. The amount of poison ingested by the coyotes is not enough to kill them outright, but it suppresses their immune system and leaves them upon to opportunistic infections such as mange and respiratory illnesses. These illnesses leave the animals unable to hunt successfully, so they resort to raiding garbage, grabbing house pets, and unfortunately, scavenging dead rats, which puts even more poison into their systems. It's a sad irony that if people were more tolerant of coyotes living among us, there would be less need to use poison to control rodents in the first place.

Unfortunately, there is very little that can be done for a coyote with mange. Coyotes are too smart to enter humane traps, so catching one to treat it is very, very difficult. Also, catching and treating coyotes requires a specialized license from the Department of Fish and Game, in addition to a regular wildlife rehab license. I believe that the California Wildlife Center in Sylmar holds the only Los Angeles County coyote license. There used to be several of us, but the number of wildlife rescuers in California has dropped by over 50% in the past decade due to increased regulation and fees imposed by the Dept. of Fish and Game. The California Wildlife

Center will generally not trap animals themselves, only treat animals that are brought to them, but a call to them might help find some other resources. Their phone # is (818) 222-2658 (www.cawildlife.org).

And I hate, hate, hate to say this and give this info but... sometimes the best thing to do for a very sick coyote, or group of coyotes, is to have them trapped and humanely euthanized. If the animals are truly sick and/or are truly creating a health hazard, the County will step in and kill them. The department responsible for doing that is the Dept. of Agriculture, Weights and Measures, they can be reached at their Arcadia offices at 626-575-5462. They will assess the situation, advise you on what can be done, and send someone out if necessary. I personally think that they are too quick to kill, but I also believe that an animal should not have to suffer a slow and painful death if there is an alternative. And for better or worse, they are the ones who can help.

I have made this sound very depressing, for which I apologize. But, there **are** things we can do to improve the situation, for humans and for coyotes. The first is to truly understand that trapping and relocating them is simply not an option. It does not work. The coyotes that are moved will die, and more will come to take their place. It is also illegal in California to trap and relocate wildlife unless you are the Dept. of Fish and Game, and they do it only rarely, and only with mountain lions and bears, not coyotes. So how do we live with them? We have to accept that they live here too and adjust our own behaviors accordingly. Just as we do not let our pets play in the streets because they might be run over by a car, we cannot let them roam loose because they might be eaten by a coyote. It is simply part of pet ownership that we must protect our pets from hazards, and in our area, coyotes are one of those hazards. We can also take steps to make our yards less attractive to coyotes. Keep pet food indoors. Keep your trash secured. Pick up fallen fruit and keep your ripe vegetables picked. Clear away and piles of brush or trash. Make sure that the crawl spaces under your house and porch are not accessible. Sweep up under bird feeders. You don't have to make your yard into a barren wasteland, you just have to remove things that would draw wildlife to your yard.

As an example, in the area where I live, the Meadows, we have every type of wildlife native to the area, including coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, and bears. But no one in this area has ever lost a pet to predation. I myself have a two small dogs, three cats, a flock of chickens, and three goats, and have never had an animal killed by wildlife. It is possible, if everyone in the neighborhood does their part, to co-exist peacefully and successfully alongside with wildlife. We just have to understand that they live here too; that they have no malicious intent; and that if we leave them alone and let them do their job of rodent control, it will work out better for all of us - we won't have rats, and they won't sicken and die from us trying to poison the rats.

Once again, thank you for your concern for America's "song dog".

MaryEllen Schoeman
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