

The Wild Next Door

Coexisting with coyotes in our neighbourhoods and parks

He walked toward me with his little 10-pound Maltipoo in tow.

“Excuse me... do you think you could help my dog? He’s very reactive to other dogs.”

“I’d love to help. When did the reactivity start?” I asked.

“Well, it began after he was attacked by a coyote,” the man replied.

I listened in horrified silence, punctuated only by the occasional gasp, as he described a terrifying encounter that left both him and his dog traumatized — though thankfully alive and well.

My first question was whether they lived in the country. To my surprise, his answer was the opposite: they lived in a large subdivision in a busy city. That moment made me realize how little I knew about coyotes. Determined to help my new clients, I began researching how to prevent others from experiencing similar conflict with these wild neighbours.

Why are conflicts increasing?

The main reason is us. Humans have created many of the conditions that lead to encounters, conflicts and altercations with coyotes.

- **Habitat loss:** Every time we build a subdivision or clear a forest, we eliminate the coyote’s natural territory.
- **Food sources:** Poor waste management, fallen fruit and bird feeders attract small mammals that are easy meals for coyotes.
- **Habituation:** Over time, coyotes lose their fear of humans, drawing them closer to our homes and pets.

As human and coyote worlds collide, misunderstanding has bred fear of and hatred for coyotes. To coexist with these beautiful canids, let’s take some time to get to know them a bit better.

The coyote

Coyotes are indigenous to North America and are an important element of the North American ecosystem. Their main diet is rodents such as rabbits, mice and moles. By helping to control the rodent and herbivore populations, coyotes also indirectly help preserve vegetation. And they’re nature’s undertakers, eating carrion (dead animals), helping to prevent the spread of disease and returning organic matter to the soil, supporting plant life. Coyotes primarily hunt at dawn and dusk; however, they’re often seen during the day as well. As humans continue to take over their natural habitat, coyotes have learned how to survive in any climate or topography — from harsh cold to extreme heat.

Mating season

Coyotes mate for life and often form family packs with their pups. Mating season is between January and March, with pups being born usually between April and May. Between late August and early winter, the pups are almost full size and start venturing out and exploring. They are

curious, fearless and lack territorial boundaries. During this period, coyotes can easily become habituated to humans and increase the likelihood of unhealthy interactions.

Habituation: the human factor

So, what exactly are we humans doing that have led to coyotes becoming less fearful of us?

The major issue is humans aren't great at cleaning up after ourselves. We leave garbage lying around. We place household waste in containers or bags outside where wildlife can gain access to it. We put out bird feeders and don't clean up the seeds that fall, attracting other animals that are the coyote's natural prey. We plant fruit trees and when ripened fruit falls to the ground, we leave it there. And well-intentioned citizens put out food for wildlife, as if they needed our help to survive.

So how has habituation increased the risk to our pets? It's simple really. Our dogs are naturally curious, but lack wild instincts. They can venture too close to a coyote den or may chase a coyote thinking it's play. Sometimes, a dog will run right into a den and disturb a family pack. Did the coyote lure the dog? No. The coyote is just being a coyote and any animal will try to protect themselves and their family when confronted with a threat.

Our cats and little dogs are simply too small to be seen as anything but prey to the coyote. Especially during puppy rearing season or in the dead of winter. A mother coyote trying to feed her young will go after anything she can safely catch. And a small dog or cat prancing around unsupervised is just too easy a catch to pass up.

Keeping the peace with coyotes

So, what can we do to live peacefully with coyotes?

- Respect coyotes and keep our distance from them as much as possible.
- Clean up garbage and secure it to prevent wildlife from getting into it.
- Never leave food items out for wildlife and clean up any fallen fruit.
- Remove bird feeders or at least clean up the ground under them.

If you come across a coyote

- Stay at least 50 feet away.
- If the coyote is closer to you than that, stand your ground and maintain eye contact.
- Make yourself look large and make loud noises such as clapping your hands or yelling.
- Do **not** run! Running will trigger the chase instinct in the coyote.
- Carry something that makes noise like a small airhorn or pet corrector (compressed air in a can available at most pet stores).
- Citronella products such as Spray Shield can act as a deterrent. Stay away from inhumane options like pepper spray.
- Carry a bright flashlight. Coyotes will often steer clear of bright lights.
- Carry an umbrella. The flapping motion could frighten away the coyote and act as a shield between you and them so you can back away safely.

Keeping our pets safe

Helping our pets avoid conflict with coyotes comes down to awareness and management.

- Always monitor your pets outside, especially at dawn and dusk.
- Be aware of your surroundings when walking your dog. Look for evidence of coyotes such as coyote scat (poop) or footprints, which look like a dog's, but will be single file because coyotes walk in their previous footsteps.
- From April until early winter, keep dogs leashed to prevent interference with wildlife. A dog approaching a coyote den is likely to be met with angry coyote family members.
- Dress your dog in a coyote vest to help prevent any serious injuries from bites.
- Keep cats indoors or build enclosed outdoor areas for cats using strong materials. Note a determined coyote can break through chicken wire.

Final thoughts

It's important to remember that coyotes are not the villains of this story. They are survivors. They use their intelligence and resiliency to overcome adversity to ensure their species continues to exist. They play a vital role in our ecosystems. We humans need to respect their space, clean up after ourselves and protect our pets with simple precautions. Stop trying to feed coyotes and other wildlife, so that they can keep a healthy level of fear of humans. Take the time to learn about coyotes and enjoy seeing them from afar. The more we understand these resilient canids, the better equipped we are to live alongside them in harmony.

To learn more about coyotes, visit:

Coyote Watch Canada www.coyotewatchcanada.com

Project Coyote www.projectcoyote.org



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