



For now, urban coyotes pose little threat to humans

By John Mangels, The Plain Dealer

January 24, 2010, 12:00AM



Lynn Ischay / The Plain Dealer

These signs went up in parts of the Cleveland Metroparks' Brecksville Reservation in January cautioning visitors, especially dog-walkers, to be aware of coyotes in the area.

Earlier this month, rangers posted signs in the Cleveland Metroparks' Brecksville Reservation cautioning visitors that they are entering a coyote habitat.

The signs at the popular park 15 miles from downtown Cleveland, are the latest indicator that coyotes are a fact of life in densely populated Northeast Ohio.

The animals normally are timid and adjust their activities to avoid people. The vast majority of encounters are brief sightings, a flash of tawny brown fur or bushy, black-tipped tail as the animal heads for cover or goes about its business. Coyote attacks on humans are extremely rare.

But some researchers and wildlife officials worry that increasing contact with people, especially when the animals begin to associate people with food, will cause urban-dwelling coyotes to lose their natural wariness, heightening the potential for conflicts.

A review of 142 U.S. and Canadian coyote attacks from 1960 to 2006 by Ohio State University biologist Stan Gehrt found that in 30 percent of the cases, nearby residents were deliberately feeding coyotes or inadvertently leaving food where the animals could get it, likely reducing coyotes' natural avoidance of humans.

Only two people are known to have died from coyote attacks: a 3-year-old Glendale, Calif., girl mauled in her front yard in 1981, and popular 19-year-old Canadian folk singer Taylor Mitchell, who **died Oct. 28, 2009**, a day after being attacked by a pair of coyotes while hiking alone in Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Highlands National Park.

By comparison, in the last three years **86 people died from dog-bite injuries** in the United States.

Canadian officials are still investigating the Mitchell attack, including trying to determine if the animals involved are big Northeastern coyotes that have cross-bred with wolves.

"A lot of people are pointing toward the Canadian fatality as evidence that maybe these larger [wolf-coyote hybrid] animals are going to be much more of a threat toward people than the typical coyote is," said Gehrt. "It's totally anecdotal. We don't know what happened there."

Considering that wolf attacks on people are even more uncommon than coyote attacks, Gehrt said, "you come to the opposite conclusion – that having more wolf in [a coyote] makes them more passive."

Because of unfamiliarity or outsized concerns about coyotes' aggressiveness, people often complain to police and park rangers about the animals at first sight, not bite.

Unlike most other urban wildlife, "they can be considered a nuisance without any evidence of damage, but simply by being seen," notes Gehrt in a brochure from the Cook County, Ill., Coyote Project, which studies the large coyote population in the Greater Chicago area.



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Cleveland Metroparks

Last September, an automatically triggered camera at the Cleveland Metroparks' Bedford Reservation captured this image of an "alpha female" that has been seen in the park for several years. "She goes into an unmistakable dark red coat about mid-April until she fades to more of a gray in November through March," said senior natural-resource manager Rick Tyler.

That's not to suggest coyotes don't pose any threat. They will defend dens and pups – hence the Brecksville Reservation signs, which note the January to June mating and pup-rearing season. Dog-walkers in the park noted some growling and other coyote aggressive behavior probably triggered by their pets, said Metroparks senior natural resource manager Rick Tyler.

Coyotes sometimes will snatch small dogs or cats, although **a 2004 analysis** of coyote droppings collected in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park found no evidence that the animals were eating domestic pets.

Diet studies here and in other parts of the country show that even



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A coyote peers through tall grass at the Cuyahoga Valley National Park in this 2004 photo.

But studies here and in other parts of the country show that even when coyotes have ready access to pets and garbage, they prefer mice and other small rodents, rabbits, birds, goose eggs, fruit and carrion. In that regard, they help control pests and keep ecosystems healthy.

Besides hunger and defense, rabies can provoke a coyote to attack. A bicyclist riding in the Metroparks' North Chagrin Reservation in 2005 was bitten by a coyote, and tests of a coyote that rangers shot and killed after the incident determined it was infected with a rabies strain carried by raccoons. The cyclist was treated, and wildlife officials dropped bait laced with rabies vaccine to curtail the virus.

If people and domestic pets are at relatively low risk from coyotes, the same can't be said for livestock.

"The number one problem in our industry is coyotes," said Roger High, executive director of the **Ohio Sheep Improvement Association**, which represents the state's 3,200 sheep farmers. "That's one of the big reasons people get out of the business."

Coyotes prey on lambs, High said, as well as posing problems for goats, chickens, pigs and cattle. With lambs worth \$150 apiece at market, the loss of 100 animals a year – not uncommon – takes a big bite out of a farmer's budget, High said. A state fund that compensated farmers for some of the cost ran out of money last year, he said.

Farmers use a variety of methods to protect their herds, from shooting and trapping coyotes – there's no hunting season and no limit on kills in Ohio – to using electrified fences and guard dogs, donkeys and even llamas. A guard llama has patrolled High's Union County farm for a dozen years and he's never lost a sheep to a coyote.

The animals pose a surprising but serious threat to aircraft, too.

Planes that were landing, taxiing or taking off have struck coyotes 16 times at Ohio airports since 1994, most often at Cleveland Hopkins International, according to the **Federal Aviation Administration**.

In the most recent Hopkins encounter, on the night of April 14, 2007, an Air Wisconsin commuter jet touching down on a snowy runway clipped a coyote with its landing gear, cutting the animal in half.

None of the Ohio incidents, which ranged from small private planes to business jets and big commercial airliners, resulted in serious harm to the aircraft. Elsewhere in the United States, though, **the FAA reports** that coyote-plane impacts caused \$2.7 million in damage from 1990 to 2008 and disrupted 62 flights.

"It's not an insignificant problem," said Mike Begier, the national coordinator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's airport hazards

Avoiding coyote conflicts

Don't feed them, or leave out potential food.

Don't let pets run loose, especially cats and small dogs.

If confronted, don't run; instead, yell or throw something in the coyote's direction.

Use repellents or fencing.

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Strategies to reduce the coyote threat at airports include maintaining fences, trimming vegetation to control the rodents that coyotes like to eat, using loud sounds to startle the animals away, and as a last resort, shooting or trapping.

Report aggressive coyotes immediately to police or park rangers.

Source: Cook County Coyote Project

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