



The Eastern Coyote: It's Closer Than You Think!

When the sun drops over the western horizon and the blackness of night blankets our surroundings, they come. Some sneak along using every square inch of cover vegetation affords them. Others boldly walk through well-manicured backyards and poke around in parks. Yes, the eastern coyote can be a secretive, run-for-the-hills-at-the-slightest-noise type of critter. But, it also can be quite bold, killing chickens in barnyards, eating from pet dishes and even killing and eating pets.

For as much as we have learned about coyotes - the state's second largest predator - there's still plenty more to figure out. It's unclear when they arrived in Pennsylvania, but evidence dates back to the 1930s. With each passing year, we learn more about their increasing tolerance of people and adaptability. At one time, we believed coyotes to be reclusive canids that would only inhabit Pennsylvania's more remote regions. We know better now!

Eastern coyotes, which generally weigh 30 to 50 pounds, expanded their range dramatically in Pennsylvania from the 1970s through the early 1990s. Once a northern tier resident, coyotes now are becoming as common in the state's suburban sprawl as raccoons, skunks and groundhogs. Sometimes they're very visible. Sometimes they're not. But they're there, waiting to capitalize on any and every opportunity civilization affords them. They are shrewd. They are powerful. And, they are here to stay.

In recent years, the Pennsylvania Game Commission has received increasing reports and complaints about eastern coyotes and the damage they have caused. Just 20 years ago, seeing one was unusual. Now, they're regularly observed darting across roads, feeding on road-kills, and sitting or hunting in fields. They even come in to turkey calls made by hunters. They seem to be more vocal nowadays than in the past, too. Residents report hearing coyotes howl and yip in many counties, particularly at dusk and early in the night.

Although the Game Commission hasn't received many reports of aggressive coyote behavior, there was one incident in Dauphin County where a man was attacked by more than one coyote on the Second Mountain in the mid 1990s. In the incident, a tree-trimmer had just finished crawling through some thick brush trying to get a better look at a deer. As he attempted to stand, coyotes attacked him, knocking him back to the ground, ripping his clothes apart, and biting his hands, arms and legs. The man managed to grab a dead branch and used it to fend off his attackers. He was later taken to the hospital, where his wounds were stitched and dressed and he began treatment for rabies as a precaution.

Why the coyotes attacked the man is unclear. When interviewed later, the man said he was wearing camouflage hunting pants and added that the pants may have had deer scent on them. That information and an account of the attack, offer several possibilities for the confrontation: 1.) the coyotes mistook him for a deer, since he was crawling - and possibly smelled like a deer - and one deer already had come through the area; 2.) he was difficult to identify as a

human because he was crawling and wearing camouflage clothing; and 3.) he surprised the coyotes and they responded by attacking him.

Coyotes attacking people hasn't been a problem in Pennsylvania. In fact, one recorded attack in more than 30 years suggests coyotes have preferred to avoid close encounters with people. But in California, western coyotes have been involved in dozens of attacks on pets with people in close proximity and people since the late 1970s. Closer to home, eastern coyote attacks - some involving rabid coyotes - have been recorded in New York, Ohio and Massachusetts.

The fact that coyote attacks continue to occur in California, and are occurring more frequently in America's Northeast and eastern Canada, is something Game Commission officials will continue to monitor. These incidents largely appear to be the result of the coyote's uncanny ability to adapt and persevere, and a lack of regard and respect for coyotes by people who live near coyotes. Today, coyotes are believed to inhabit every county in the state.

Coyotes are predatory opportunists that prefer to acquire their meals with no more effort than necessary. But in times of extreme need - for instance, when procuring food for pups - they seem willing to go to extraordinary lengths to satisfy that necessity. That's when they sometimes enter barnyards and backyards, and parks and parking lots in their quest for food.

On the whole, Pennsylvania coyotes tend to head in the other direction when they encounter people, or detect that people have entered their home range in the wild. Coyotes in other states that have been involved in attacks on people and pets often appear to be those that live near people or regularly patrol suburban settings. They are animals that have become accustomed to people, because those people rarely chase, shoot at or even yell at them. In some cases, they even feed coyotes, both intentionally and unintentionally. No good has ever resulted from inviting coyotes into your community or backyard for supper.

The problem with coyotes and people in Pennsylvania is that few residents recognize that coyotes live in state, let alone that they often share the same stomping grounds, albeit coyotes are typically more active at night. Because people and coyotes rarely cross paths, people generally don't take steps to ensure coyotes aren't drawn to their properties.

Pennsylvania's coyote population is believed to have occupied all of the wilder areas of the state during its range expansion from northern counties southward in the 1980s and '90s. Today, about the only places left for coyotes to claim as unoccupied coyote territory are the busier suburban and urban areas of the state. And, in many cases, coyotes already are there raiding neighborhoods in some of these areas, where people keep and feed pets outside, place garbage outside in bags without the protection of a garbage can, and where discarded or littered fast-food is easy to acquire.

In places where coyotes have been left with no choice but to live close to people, they have adapted and, in fact, thrived. What will happen next with Pennsylvania's coyotes is unclear. But if the state follows the trends unfolding in other nearby states, it stands to reason that we'll be seeing more and more of coyotes. And problems are sure to follow. That's why it's imperative for Pennsylvanians to make adjustments now, to reduce and possibly avoid close encounters with coyotes in the future.

The Game Commission cannot guarantee that any community or neighborhood won't have coyote intrusions. They are, after all, free-roaming, intelligent predators. In 2003, we believed Pennsylvania's population numbered between 25,000 and 30,000. At that time, trappers and hunters were removing about 11,000 annually statewide, which offset reproduction gains, mostly in rural areas. Around towns and in the suburbs, however, coyote populations likely are increasing, because few are harvested annually due to limitations on hunting and trapping in high-human density areas. Coyote population losses in developed areas usually are limited to those hit by cars or afflicted with disease.

To avoid encounters or problems with coyotes - as well as other wildlife, here are a few steps every homeowner should

consider:

Pet Offense: Don't allow your dog or cat to roam unattended. Pets kept outdoors, should be fenced-in.

Keep It Clean: Never place garbage bags outside without placing them in protective containers. If you feed pets outside, clean up the leftovers when your pet is finished eating. Don't throw table-scraps, or fish and game entrails in the field behind the house.

Keep It Clear: Reduce or eliminate vegetative cover that coyotes could use to approach your property undetected. This includes weedy patches, reverting fields and fallen trees. Weedy and brushy areas are great habitat for rodents, which coyotes hunt regularly. Coyotes also aren't as comfortable in open areas near dwellings.

Get Out Of Here: It's never comforting to see coyotes hunting or looking for food near homes. Yell at the animal or shine a light on it immediately. Making them feel uncomfortable is the best way to prevent them from becoming habituated to humans.

Say Something: If you see a coyote near someone's home or in a suburban setting, let your neighbors know about it. Together, you can keep a closer eye on the neighborhood and work to keep it unattractive to coyotes.