

Urban coyotes in North Oakville

Understanding our fear and learning to live with predators in our community

"Nothing in life is to be feared. It is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so we may fear less."

- Marie Curie

By Michael Howie

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A North Oakville woman walking the paths of 14 Mile Creek is suddenly face to face with a coyote, its head slightly bowed, in all appearances waiting for an opportunity to attack. In the blink of an eye, the predator is gone.

From the window of a Glen Abbey home, a resident sees a flash of movement in the backyard. But the movement is much too large and swift to belong to the family's pet Chihuahua. The resident opens the back door to investigate and sees the tiny family pet in the grasp of a coyote. The sound of the door opening frightens the coyote who drops the dog and escapes over the fence and into the ravine.

The terrifying stories of coyotes in North Oakville are plentiful. These carnivores appear as suddenly as they disappear. They hunt in backyards, stalk the pathways and leave residents with an ominous feeling.

We are afraid. But should we be?

Fear of coyotes

"When there's something with the potential to hurt us, we're afraid," offered Michael Runtz, a professor at Carleton University and renowned Ontario wildlife expert. "It's part of our psyche. Consider the safety of driving on the QEW; it is far more dangerous, yet we shrug that off because we accept that we're safe in a car. But if you mention there's a pack of coyotes around the corner, we're reminded of that fear."

Runtz explained that while cars weren't part of our history thousands of years ago, large carnivores, like coyotes, certainly were.

Evolutionary psychology, the explanation of psychological traits which are functional products of natural selection, verifies Runtz's belief.

"A child that requires attack or injury to learn that an animal is dangerous is unlikely to survive for long," wrote David M. Buss in *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology*. "For this reason, we might expect natural selection to have created a specialized learning system."

In his book, Buss points to studies indicating that nonhuman primates (apes, gorillas, etc.) are able to "culturally transmit" learned knowledge such as fear of predators and "pre-specified cues to dangerousness" (sharp teeth, large size, etc.). He theorizes that this is likely common in human evolution as well.

Human fear is a driving force behind the request for management of coyotes, noted top urban carnivore scientist Stanley Gehrt in Oxford Press' *Urban Carnivores: Ecology, Conflict and Conservation*.

"Fear often dictates the public's response to the presence of carnivores in developed areas," he wrote.

North Oakville is home to many natural predators – red-tailed hawks, red foxes and domestic cats – all who compete with coyotes for many of the same food groups. Though according to Gehrt, "coyotes differ from most other urban wildlife in that they can be



This coyote has been seen hunting the open field areas near North Service Road West in South Glen Abbey in recent months. There are no reports of it approaching any humans.

Photo by Michael Howie

deemed worthy of removal simply by being seen, rather than after they have caused some damage or inconvenience for human residents."

History of coyotes

Coyotes began appearing in Ontario over 100 years ago, mostly because citizens created the coyotes' ideal environment.

"The habitat changed," said Runtz. "From the 1600s to the 1800s, there was a major change in landscape. Coyotes are open country animals, not forest animals. When continuous forest was cleared for large scale agriculture, the habitat favoured coyotes."

Eastern Coyotes as they are now known are actually a genetic mix of Western Coyotes and Eastern Wolves, which were the original apex predator in this area.

"As the coyotes came in around 1900, the females dispersed in greater distances than males did," Runtz explained. "They began looking for a mate, and there were a few isolated wolves left."

Studies in the northeastern United States have shown that the increases of wolf DNA in coyotes does not directly affect their behaviour.

Removing coyotes

The idea of hunting coyotes to thin their numbers has been brought into the limelight recently due to media-generated fear and complaints from farmers and hunters. But there is a reason the cartoon coyote was named Wiley.

"You can't wipe out coyotes," Runtz said. "They've tried in the prairies for hundreds of years. Extermination programs don't work. They're resilient and when there's disruption efforts in trying to kill them off, there are more pairs breeding. Even if they entirely killed off coyotes in Oakville, you'd see them back again in just a few years. Unless you put up a 10-metre fence all around Oakville, it would be impossible to eliminate them."

Ministry of Natural Resources spokesperson Jolanta Kowalski agreed with Runtz, noting that numerous studies support that theory.

"We've been telling people that hav-

ing contests, culls or bounties will not solve the problem," Kowalski said. "There are people who are holding contests and are saying it's keeping the population down, but it's not an accurate statement. It's been studied for many years."

Residents will often use the term 'balance' to explain the need to eliminate, or reduce, a species' population.

"There is no balance of nature," said Runtz. "Nature is dynamic."

Runtz offered a microcosm of a pine tree as an example: small rodents will feed from the seeds of pine cones, dropped by pine trees. When the pine cones produce more seeds, more mice will survive. The numbers of litters increase, the numbers swell, the food source does not, and then there's a crash in populations.

"There are cycles, but very few that are predictable," said Runtz. "If coyotes become over abundant, the way the numbers are thinned down are not attractive: starvation, mange, other disease... that's the way nature works. It's not a kind system."

"There's this wrong impression that we are the ones who should be controlling animal populations," he added. "If we didn't touch coyotes at all, they probably wouldn't get any more common. They have a number of needs to ensure survival. They'll reach those limits and hold there until there's a disruption. There's a misconception that an uncontrolled animal population will grow infinite. We don't have the ability to say, god-like, that there's too many of

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**– Stanley Gehrt
Coyote researcher**

an animal. I think it's wrong for us to assume the role of controllers of animal populations."

Living together

Evidence clearly shows that coyotes can not, and should not, be driven from urban centres with the exception of extreme cases of individual aggressiveness.

But living together peacefully means knowing what to do when confronted with a coyote and almost more importantly, knowing what not to do.

In the groundbreaking Chicago Study, Gehrt noted only five of the 150 radio-collared coyotes were identified as nuisances, and, "in each case, they were taking advantage of food associated with people and their yards."

"In one case, bird feeders attracted a coyote as well as squirrels and other rodents," he wrote. In another instance, a coyote became a nuisance due to "unintentional positive rein-

forcement of increasing aggressiveness in coyotes; that is, when coyotes begin to approach areas with human activity, people often avoid them or leave the area, lending dominance to the coyote."

Gehrt's suggestions for successful management of coyotes, or in laymen's terms, cohabiting, involves multiple steps.

"[Management of coyotes will] involve public education to reduce the opportunity for habituation [familiarity and loss of fear of humans] as well as to interpret coyote behaviour correctly and to discriminate between threatening and non-threatening behaviours. Indeed, some educational programs, such as the Stanley Park Ecology Program have successfully reduced coyote conflicts through a combination of harassment of coyotes and public education."

Noisemakers, such as cans filled with coins, motion sensor lights and volunteers who chase away coyotes from areas show positive results. Preliminary data from the Chicago study also showed positive results from harassment techniques.

It was also noted in another study cited by Gehrt that behaviours such as taking advantage of pets, trash or backyard vegetation as food sources, or being active during the day, often reflect typical behaviour for omnivorous, opportunistic and flexible predators such as coyotes. "It is likely that most coyotes that exhibit these behaviours never behave aggressively toward people."

The most common factors indicating aggressiveness do not involve following, chasing or daytime hunting, but instead include coyotes which fail to run from humans making noise or approaching, and growl or bark when approached.

Most experts agree that education is the key to successful cohabitation, and the existence of coyotes in an urban environment should be seen as a positive to the community, not a negative.

"We should embrace coyotes in urban settings rather than trying to eliminate them," concluded Runtz. "They don't pose a threat to humans... walking down the street is a greater threat. There's very little to fear from coyotes. To have them around, to hear their sounds in an urban community is a privilege, not a threat."