

## LIVING WITH “GOD’S DOG”

By Claire A. Puchy<sup>1</sup>

Living in harmony, Navajo sheep and goat herders referred to the coyote as “God’s dog”. Those of us who live in urban and suburban areas can also co-exist with these interesting members of the dog family—with a little knowledge and some behavior modifications.

It may be hard to believe, but until the 1940’s, coyotes in Oregon were considered somewhat rare west of the Cascades. Nowadays, it’s not unusual to see one wandering through neighborhoods throughout the Portland Metro area. Unfortunately, misinformation and sensational media coverage have perpetuated myths about the dangers of coyotes and therefore, unfounded fear.

Research has shown that even in highly-urbanized areas, coyotes maintain territories, breed, and raise young. Coyotes are monogamous, and typically only the dominant pair of a pack will breed. A litter born in the Spring is usually 4 to 7 pups, and the young will stay with the parents until late summer. If one of the parents is killed, another individual takes its place. And if coyotes are removed from a pack, they compensate for this loss by producing even more youngsters. This (coupled with the fact that coyotes are extremely difficult to trap) is why efforts to eliminate coyotes are not only ineffective—they are counterproductive.

February is the peak of mating season for coyotes. When you hear coyotes “sing” or “howl” (which term you use depends on your opinion of how musical it sounds), you are actually hearing pack members communicating with other packs. They do this as a way of defending a territory. Coyotes can tell how many individuals are in a neighboring pack! Generally, the alpha member of a pack will sing first, then the pups, perhaps followed by secondary members. Solitary coyotes (those who do not have a pack of their own) do not sing.

These highly-adaptable animals feed mainly on rodents, but also eat rabbits, road-killed deer, pet food, goose eggs, and fruit. Unlike raccoons, coyotes do not normally eat garbage. They will kill cats, but rarely for a meal. Dogs are also not part of their diet, although they will occasionally attack them—especially small, noisy breeds, such as Chihuahas. Coyotes are ecologically beneficial to have around because they help keep rodent and geese populations in check.

The presence of coyotes should not be of concern. Contrary to popular belief, coyote attacks on people are extremely rare, and there has never been an unprovoked attack on a human in Oregon. The only documented fatal attack in the U.S. occurred in California in

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1981. A family deliberately habituated a coyote by providing food for it each afternoon. Their toddler was left unattended where the food was offered, and was killed by the coyote. A handful of people have been nipped by coyotes, but these very rare events have been under the following circumstances: 1) people tried to pet a coyote, and 2) people were sleeping on the ground, and coyotes delivered “investigatory” nips. In contrast, over 4.7 million Americans are bitten by domestic dogs each year.

Coyotes can be influenced by our behavior. Although coyotes are normally diurnal (meaning active both daytime and at night), they have become more nocturnal in urban areas. Although they are seen during the day, they are normally shy and prefer to avoid contact with humans. However, they can become accustomed to us, particularly if they do not feel threatened. The best thing to do if you see a coyote is to yell and wave your hands. This will actually be doing coyotes a favor, since it will help keep them wary of humans. Individual coyotes that lose their fear of humans can become “problem coyotes,” giving the entire species a bad reputation. These coyotes meet unfortunate ends; they are the ones that have to be captured and euthanized.

To reduce human-coyote interactions, the Audubon Society of Portland offers these suggestions:

- Never deliberately feed a coyote.
- Remove fallen fruit from underneath trees.
- Never approach a coyote.
- Keep house pets indoors, especially from dusk to dawn, when coyotes are most active.
- Keep dogs on leashes, or within fenced areas, if outside during the day.
- Do not leave pet food outside.
- If you see a coyote, make noise and wave your arms—you will be doing yourself and the coyote a favor!

By raising awareness, and by following these tips, we can live in harmony with one of our most interesting and intelligent fellow creatures. “God’s dog” has a place and a role in urban and suburban ecosystems, and should be appreciated—not feared.

*Information Sources used for this article include:*

*Audubon Society of Portland’s “Living with Urban Wildlife” brochure*

*Draft Portland-Vancouver Model Coyote Management Policy*

*Lectures by Dr. Stanley Gehrt, Assistant Professor and Extension Wildlife Specialist, Ohio State University (presented at the Living With Urban Coyotes Symposium in Portland, Oregon in June 2006; the 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Urban Ecology & Conservation Symposium in Portland, Oregon on February 4, 2008; and at a presentation to City of Portland employees on February 5, 2008)*