

Urban coyotes

Feature

by Debra
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Increasingly, wild canines are making their homes in Chicagoland

Residents of Chicago have long done battle with rats and mice, shared downtown sidewalk space with pigeons, smiled at the antics of acrobatic squirrels in city trees and spotted occasional glimpses of deer, raccoons and opossums.

Joining such urban wildlife in increasing numbers are coyotes — a trend seen in Chicago and cities across the United States.

The numbers of “urban coyote” sightings and calls made to animal control agencies began to mount in the 1990s in Cook County, and about 2,000 coyotes, if not more, live in Cook County today, according to

Stanley Gehrt, an associate professor of wildlife biology at Ohio State University and principal investigator for the Cook County Coyote Research Project.

The migration of these coyotes into Chicago and its suburbs prompted the creation of the project, now in its 12th year. It’s an ongoing study that finds researchers attaching ear tags and radio collars to coyotes to gain such information as travel patterns, diets,

birth and death rates and what, if any, diseases coyotes carry that could be transmitted to humans and their pets.

Since 2000, no cases of rabies transmitted by coyotes have been reported, and the study has found coyotes are keeping in check populations of rats, mice, rabbits, moles and other rodents, as well as deer and Canada geese.

“I’m a lot more worried at this time about skunks than I am about coyotes,” says Dr. Donna Alexander, administrator of the Cook County Department of Animal and Rabies Control. Referring to the potential of skunks to carry and transmit rabies, Alexander adds, “Coyotes can do a lot more good than bad.” They are members of the Canidae family, which contains dogs, wolves and foxes.

Animal and Rabies Control and several other state and local agencies, Alexander says, have stepped up efforts to educate the public about ways to coexist with coyotes and prevent the wild canines from becoming nuisances. Such steps include, Alexander says, never trying to feed coyotes, not leaving dog food outside, keeping an eye on overflowing bird feeders, supervising small children and pets when outside, and keeping pets in at night or in a secured area.

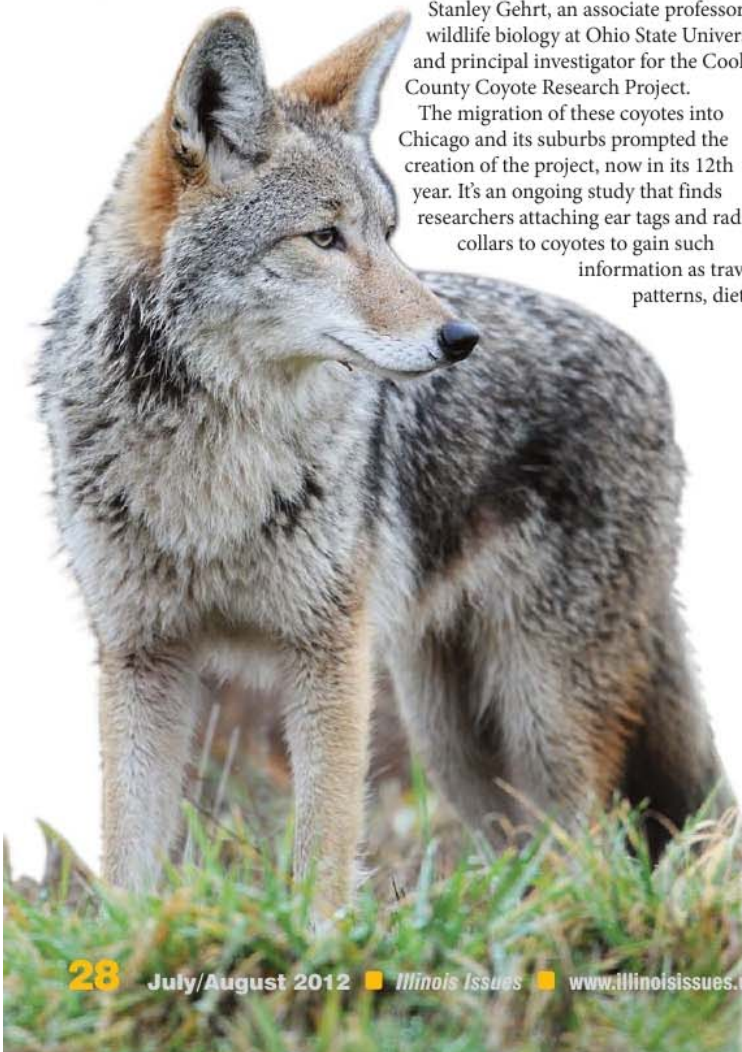
“Coyotes live in all states except Hawaii,” says Camilla Fox, executive director of Project Coyote, a national program based in Larkspur, Colo. As Gehrt and his team do in Cook County, Project Coyote staff work with local, state and national authorities across the country to develop what they say are effective, cost-saving and humane ways to manage coyote populations and boost public awareness to help humans and coyotes coexist.

Data that Gehrt and his team collect about coyotes include birth and death statistics, areas coyotes travel within Cook County, their prey and diseases they contract — information Alexander says help officials make animal control decisions.

“Coyotes and humans have always lived together. Humans just haven’t seen them,” Alexander says, adding that her department is fielding more calls about coyote sightings.

Expansion of coyotes into urban areas is relatively new. Until the 1990s, the most that coyotes ventured into Chicago was to forested reserves near the city limits, according to research data. But then, coyotes

Photograph by Rebecca Richardson



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Photograph courtesy of Stanley Gehrt



Coyote pups in a den

began moving into all areas of the Windy City and Chicago suburbs in the late 1990s.

Scientists aren't sure about the reasons for the increase in coyote populations and their moves into suburbs. Factors could include, they say, declines in wolf and mountain lion populations — which changed ecological landscapes — and human development of areas once mostly rural.

The Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation in Dundee was “increasingly inundated with complaints about coyotes taking pets and reportedly stalking children” as the 20th century came to a close, according to an Ohio State Research Communication newsletter.

“The number of calls grew, and in the late 1990s, the Cook County Department of Animal and Rabies Control asked Gehrt, then a research biologist with Max McGraw and now an Ohio State University associate professor of wildlife biology, to gather information on Chicago metro coyote populations,” the newsletter says.

Alexander says the animal and rabies control unit spends about \$150,000 per year on the Cook County Coyote Project and other coyote-related research. The money, she says, comes from the sale of rabies tags. Additional money supporting the Coyote Project, says Gehrt, comes from the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation in Dundee, the Forest Preserve District of Cook County and Ohio State University.

Gehrt and researchers have tracked nearly 500 coyotes in what has been called the most in-depth study of urban coyotes ever conducted. As part of the study, researchers temporarily trap and sedate coyotes and equip them with radio collars and ear tags. To monitor the coyotes' whereabouts, researchers drive pickup trucks equipped with antennas that pick up on the radio collar signals.

Gehrt describes the research this way on <http://urbancoyoteresearch.com>: “It is a comprehensive study of coyotes in Chicago metropolitan areas. With the help of many agencies, we capture, collar and monitor coyotes in order to understand how they live in urban areas, as well as interact with other wildlife and domestic animals.

“By providing the public with our research, we are initiating the first step of coyote management — educating the public and untangling facts from myths. People should become aware of coyote signs and understand the differences between true threats and coexistence,” he adds.

“We have tracked the coyotes day and night, locating collared coyotes more than 40,000 times over 11 years. This allows us to peek into the hidden lives of urban coyotes,” Gehrt says.

Gehrt and his researchers have found, among other things:

- Most coyotes “consistently” avoid areas associated with humans, tend to be more active at night, pose little threat to humans and generally avoid trash.

- An analysis of coyote scat in Chicago showed that less than 2 percent of a coyote's diet comes from garbage, pet food and pets.

- If coyotes are relocated to another area, they may often try to return, or other coyotes may move in where the earlier pack was.

Intentional feeding of coyotes or trying to “tame” them should be prohibited, Gehrt says. Otherwise, “management solutions will only be temporary at best.”

The Cook County Coyote Project found that most coyotes there die before reaching their first year. The leading cause of death was collision with vehicles. Other causes included shootings, malnutrition and such diseases as sarcoptic mange and parvo virus.

Survival rates for urban and rural adult coyotes in Illinois are similar, according to Gehrt. But Gehrt says the survival rates of juvenile coyotes in Cook County are approximately five times higher than the 13 percent survival rate reported for rural juvenile coyotes, because, in part, he believes, to rural coyotes' cover and shelter being lost during crop harvesting seasons. Hunting of coyotes in Illinois also occurs year-round without any regulatory constraints, such as bag limits, he adds.

Lethal removal of nuisance coyotes by professionals through trapping, euthanasia or shooting is warranted, Gehrt says, where coyote habituation is so severe that the coyotes can be considered an immediate threat to people.

Fox has found that humans generally have two distinct responses to coyotes.

Photograph courtesy of Stanley Gehrt



Heidi Garbe, an associate research scientist at the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, holds an approximately one-week-old coyote pup.

"They'll say the animals are amazing, or they'll freak out. They see a threat and are terrified," she says. "Some people have told me coyotes are twice the size of German shepherds." In fact, most of the animals are between 20 and 40 pounds.

As part of "livestock protection," the federal Wildlife Services kills an estimated 32,000 coyotes a year, shooting them on public lands or private ranches, according to the Humane Society of the United States. While ranchers and government officials may welcome such assistance, it's ineffective and costs "taxpayers millions of federal dollars annually," the Humane Society says in its February 21, 2012, online magazine.

"The thing about coyotes is, the more you kill, the more are born. ... The next year, Wildlife Services must return and kill all over again. It's a never-ending cycle of slaughter that keeps the program in business and costs taxpayers millions of federal dollars annually (plus what Wildlife Services gets from local governments and other partners)."

Agency officials say controlling predators is a must, especially in the West where livestock graze large tracts of unfenced land, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Tom Knudson writes in a recent three-part series for the *Sacramento Bee* published earlier this year.

However, Knudson adds: "Now such killing is coming under fire from scientists, former employees and others who say it often doesn't work and can set off a chain reaction of unintended, often negative consequences.

"In biological shorthand: Kill too many coyotes, and you open a Pandora's box of disease-carrying rodents, meadow-munching rabbits, bird-eating feral cats and, over time, smarter, more abundant coyotes. You also can sentence the deer you are trying to help to slow death by starvation."

Until the last decade, researchers had relatively little data about coexistence between humans and coyotes in urban areas, Alexander says. In April, an Aurora man told authorities he was taking a cigarette break about midnight outside his house when a coyote lunged at him, biting and scratching his hand before running off with what looked like a second coyote.

"We are looking into that report. It seems like unusual behavior for a coyote," Gehrt said in May.

Before the April report, the last documented report of a coyote attacking a human in the Chicago area occurred in the late 1980s or early 1990s, Chris Anchor, a wildlife biologist with the Forest Preserve District of Cook County, told the *Morris Daily Herald*. Anchor said a Glenview man who had been feeding a coyote attempted to touch it, and the coyote maimed the man's hand.

Sometimes coyotes can be seen in highly visible places, such as city streets, cemeteries or even airport runways. Members of the Chicago Fire Department in winter 2010 rescued a coyote stranded on a large piece of ice in Lake Michigan hundreds of yards from shore. In 2007, animal control workers removed a coyote from a Quinzos in downtown Chicago. The coyote startled customers by walking through an open door and lying down inside an open cooler. Both animals were taken to Flint Creek Wildlife Rehabilitation, a state and federally licensed private, not-for-profit corporation that cares for injured and orphaned wildlife and provides education about wildlife and wildlife-related issues. Its main facility is in Barrington.

The Illinois Department of Natural Resources has online information about the hunting of coyotes, and about humans coexisting in urban areas with wildlife, including coyotes, says spokesman Tim Schweitzer. About 30,000 coyotes live throughout Illinois, according to the IDNR.

Data that Gehrt and his team have gathered for the Cook County Coyote Project can be applied, Gehrt believes, to management of urban coyote populations in other cities without upsetting ecosystems and putting unnecessary dents in cash-strapped government budgets.

Scientific data and public policy recommendations aside, Gehrt, who combines teaching at Ohio State with the Cook County study, says he simply likes studying coyotes and learning about them and their influences on a wider ecosystem. "I respect them and how they have learned to adapt. I once saw a coyote judge traffic and cross eight lanes." ■

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Photograph courtesy of Stanley Gehrt



Stanley Gehrt holds a six-week-old subject of his research.