

The coyote:

Hero or villain, it is adapting to urban life

Story by Andrew Hind

The coyote is an animal both revered and reviled. Native Americans consider it among the greatest of spirit animals, noted for its wisdom and benevolence. In the west, the coyote's nocturnal serenades are a characteristic of the true nature of the land. And then there is the opposite opinion, one voiced with increasing loudness here in Halton.

Farmers complain, with some justification, about predation on their livestock, and some urban dwellers worry about increased sightings of coyotes in public spaces and their own back yards.

Is the coyote hero or villain? The truth is somewhere in between. What's certain is that debate only exists because the coyote is among the most adaptive animals in North America.

The coyote is native to the west, its original range extending as far north as the tundra and south into the deserts of Mexico, from the Rockies as far east as Manitoba.

They began to migrate into Ontario in the early 1900s as eastern forests were transformed into farmland, which reduced habitat for the native wolves and created vast open spaces not unlike the Prairies where they originated. Coyotes thrived, even in close proximity with human habitation.

The coyote is one of three separate canid spe-

'Increased encounters with coyotes are more a function of towns expanding into the wild spaces that are their habitat.'

—Norm Miller,
Communications Advisor
for Conservation Halton

cies in Ontario: the coyote (*Canis latrans*), gray wolf (*Canis lupus*), and the eastern wolf (*Canis lycaon*). It is a medium-sized dog, with a slender muzzle, very large pointed ears, long slender legs, and a tail roughly half the body length with a well-developed bush.

It's notable that eastern coyotes are significantly larger than their western counterparts, typically weighing as much as 20 pounds heavier (the aver-

age Ontario coyote comes in at around 45-55 pounds) and several inches taller. In fact, many coyotes in Ontario are comparable in size to small German Shepherds. Trent University did an extensive study into this disparity and determined that coyotes in Ontario have crossed with the eastern wolf.

Coyotes are very social creatures, with the family pack, consisting of a mated pair and their pups, constituting the basic social unit. Occasionally, larger packs are seen, particularly in winter, but these are thought to include related individuals, such as members of previous litters. These packs join together, sitting in a circle in the evening, and howl together in a hauntingly beautiful serenade. In fact, their Latin name comes from this trademark cry; *Canis Latrans* means 'barking dog.'

In recent years, these cries have been heard with increased frequency in Halton, even in urban areas. Coyotes are able to effortlessly adjust to human settlement and thrive in the vicinity of farms and towns. This heightened interaction with humans has led to unease in some quarters.

The sight of coyotes prowling in residential parks and backyards has caused urban dwellers to worry about the safety of their children and pets. This is likely more the product of ignorance than well-grounded fear; unlike the wolves they resemble, reports of coyotes attacking humans are rare and



Coyotes continue to worry residents across the Greater Toronto Area as there have been incidents of pets, including one earlier this year in Georgetown, being

snatched by the predator. Attacks on humans are extremely rare.

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