

THE HUNGRY SEASON

Naturalists say coyotes are shy animals, but livestock producers and owners of missing pets say the animal is a 'serious pest'

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

Coyotes in the wild are shy animals. The coyote prowling Shirley Brangers' property in north Markham this month was not. The animal, confronted just after dawn by the Brangers' seven Cocker Spaniels out for a run, killed the youngest, a six-month-old puppy named Cara.

It fled, reluctantly, after Brangers' daughter Kerri went to the back of the house to investigate the barking.

"The creature was there and the dogs were swarming it," said Brangers, who raises spaniels as show dogs.

Cara's windpipe was crushed; the bites went through her ribs and punctured her lungs, said veterinarian Leslie Brangers, another daughter who examined the body.

"I worry now about my little dog and my kids," she said.

Shirley Brangers, at her rural 19th Line home near Stouffville, said the family has lost six cats to coyotes over the last few years.

"You leave one out at night and it's gone" — and a neighbour lost two cats and a miniature poodle, which was found dead in the Brangers' hayfield.

'BOLD ANIMALS'

"These animals are becoming a serious pest," she concluded Dec. 1, the day the attack happened.

Why did this coyote — likely the large female caught in a trap set on the spot the following week — turn from its normal diet of rodents and birds to feed on household pets?

Local naturalists say coyotes are naturally reclusive. Those in Markham's Milne Dam Conservation Area disappear at first glimpse of humans and their dogs, said Leslie Price, who belongs to the Milne Park Conservation Association.

"Were the predator, as far as they're concerned."

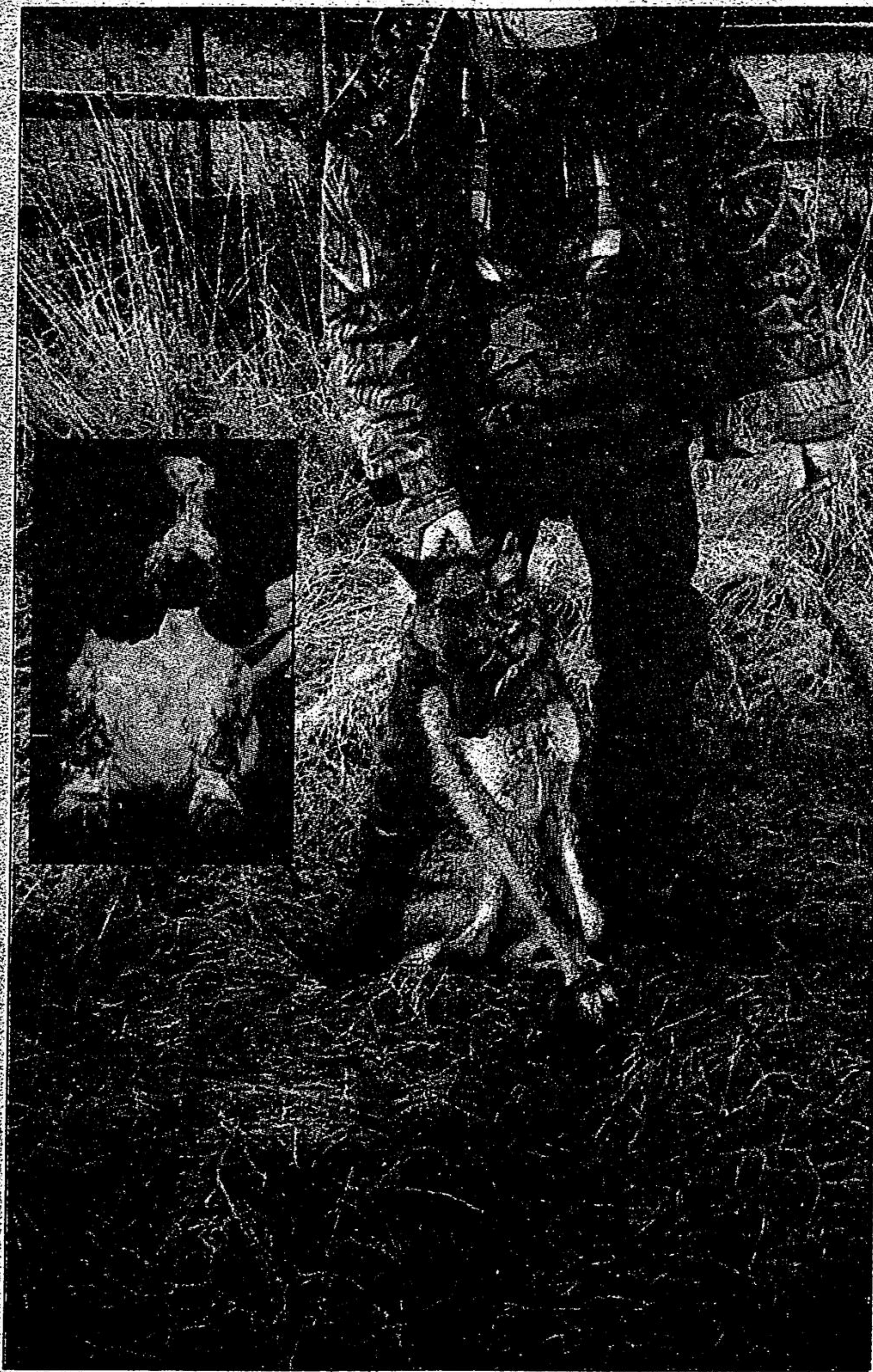
But livestock producers and owners of missing pets have a different view.

"They're pretty bold animals," according to Lionel Purcell, a Stouffville farmer who said coyotes have come right up to his house to take sheep.

This is the hungry season for coyotes, a time of year when small animals are harder to find, he said.

Taking a dog in daylight is not usual, but the animal being very young, that would indicate that it's tender pickings, whether it's a rabbit or a pup, Purcell said.

The only thing the Brangers can do is put



A prowling coyote killed a six-month-old puppy Cara (inset) at a 19th Line home near Stouffville earlier this month. Experts say they doubt coyote-culling will work because control programs on the animal in the past have no effect.

up a chain link fence, added Purcell, who hasn't had a problem since his own fence went up seven years ago.

No one knows how many live in the GTA, but with the rapid development of places such as Vaughan and Markham, coyotes are seen more often, glimpsed in ravine back-

yards or spotted loping across farm fields.

"We get calls all the time," said Dan Stuckey, a wildlife expert with the Kortright Centre in Vaughan.

The Eastern Coyote, which has replaced and interbred with the Grey Wolf in southern Ontario, is reclusive and predictable in the

wild. In urban areas, they tend to lose a bit of their shyness, said Julie Lefebvre, wildlife services director for the Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Experts say this leads to more encounters between the adaptable coyotes and domestic animals as new subdivisions and industrial parks kick coyotes out of their homes and remove natural feeding areas. "Please protect your pets and don't allow them to wander, especially at night," says a "coyote warning" posted in a Markham animal clinic, "in memory of Colby and Oscar," two missing cats, which may have been caught by coyotes.

They are here to stay. History has proven that intensive control programs on the animal have no effect whatsoever.

In February, a homeowner in the Hunter's Point area of Richmond Hill said three coyotes approached his dogs and one picked up his Bichon Frise. He chased them away, but the coyotes came back and "sat there howling."

In August, some residents near Milne Park thought coyotes had taken six cats in a matter of weeks, although Price believes humans may be responsible, citing a rash of pet mutilations in Toronto at the time.

During the last year and a half, a couple of dozen such incidents in the GTA were reported to the province's Natural Resources Ministry — miniscule compared to the number of dog attacks and pets run over by cars, said John Almond, a ministry fish and wildlife specialist.

Coyote experts agree coyotes are sometimes blamed for attacks by dogs, that dogs can be more destructive to livestock and that some wild dogs even resemble coyotes.

They also say part of the problem is caused by people leaving pet food outdoors or deliberately feeding wild animals.

If there ever is a coyote attack on humans in Ontario, it will be an animal that has lost its fear through such feeding, Stuckey predicted.

Still, Doug Johnston, predator information officer for Ontario's livestock producers, estimated farmers lose between 5,000 and 6,000 sheep a year to predators — twice the losses reported to the government.

"Some of it's domestic dogs," he admitted.

Producers such as the Ontario Sheep Marketing Agency want more government research on coyotes, Johnston said, but if the population is more than an area can support it should be reduced.

Stuckey doubts coyote-culling will work. "They are here to stay. History has proven that intensive control programs on the animal have no effect whatsoever."

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