

Wiley Neighbor

By Ed Boks

Not long ago, a City Councilmember's office received alarmed calls that a couple of coyotes were prowling the neighborhoods near one of L.A.'s most popular gathering places, the Grove. Were they shopping? Were they checking out the trendy restaurants on Third Street? Or were they posing a tangible threat to humans, as some feared. The answer probably is "none of the above."



Where did they come from? How did they get here? In many parts of Los Angeles, coyotes are an expected site, but not in this gentrified neighborhood. One theory is that they were found injured in the wild and taken in by a good Samaritan to be nursed back to health before escaping. Another is that they came in unaware in the back of a truck or other vehicle. It is also possible that they simply walked here looking for water. After all, under all this concrete, LA is still a desert, and home to many forms of wildlife. And clever coyotes might be able to walk the mile or two across LA boulevards from the nearby Hollywood Hills under the cover of darkness.

Wanting to believe we can isolate ourselves from our wild surroundings, some declare all wildlife a nuisance that should be exterminated. Humans nearly exterminated the wolf in the last century, but the coyote has proven a real survivor. Coyotes are now the principal wild canine in California, despite man's best efforts to eliminate them through trapping, shooting, and poisoning over the past 150 years. Harried, dislocated and hunted, coyotes nonetheless flourish.

Killing coyotes has the unintended consequence of producing more coyotes, not less. Mother Nature has provided our coyote neighbors with a powerful survival mechanism. When stressed by the threat of extermination, this mechanism is triggered resulting in larger litters of coyote pups.

Nature abhors a vacuum. Even if we wanted to kill all the coyotes in a designated area, history shows the vacancy wouldn't last. Larger litters would rebuild the population and, with no rivals to keep them at bay, coyotes from the surrounding areas would quickly move in.

The end result of these futile eradication efforts is always the same: the area is quickly overrun with new, and often more, coyotes.

This survival mechanism is why coyotes – once largely confined to the northwestern corner of the continental U.S. - can now be found from L.A.'s Griffith Park to New York's Central Park, from the snows of Alaska to the sultry plains of Florida. Threatened by human expansion, they find new homes wherever it was convenient.

Since our expanding cities keep eating up habitat we're destined to live with the urban, or suburban, coyote. But that shouldn't be too much trouble. Coyotes are afraid of humans and almost never attack them. The most reliable estimates assert that there have been fewer than 300 coyote attacks ever recorded resulting in human injuries, most involving small children. Since three million children are bitten by dogs every year, a child is considerably more likely to be hurt by the family pet than a coyote. Still, if you live in known coyote country, don't let your young children take unnecessary risks, especially at night.

Dog owners should also know that unsprayed female dogs in heat will attract male coyotes, and they can mate with them. Likewise unneutered male dogs can be lured by the scent of a female coyote, and there have been cases of such a lothario being killed by males in the coyote pack. Fixing your dog fixes this part of the problem.

Dogs in coyote territory should also be kept on a leash that's no longer than six feet to avoid unnecessary entanglements. Cats should be indoors at all times, and dogs too whenever feasible. Cats and small dogs are especially vulnerable to the attacks of hungry coyotes and common sense suggests prudent caution be taken with them in areas where coyotes live.

Coyotes are wild animals. They are smart, fast — they can sprint up to 40 mph — and agile – they can jump or climb very tall fences. They will take what they can get, day or night. Leaving pet food outside or leaving trash containers open encourages them to visit your house frequently. You should never feed coyotes.

Title 14 California Code of Regulations Sect. 465.5 states a trapped coyote must either be euthanized or released immediately on site. Curiously, the law allows sick or injured coyotes to be taken for rehabilitation, but it requires healthy coyotes to be killed if caught and not immediately released at the location where trapped.

And if you don't like your local coyotes, remember this: An area with coyotes is never overrun with rodents — a lesson learned by Klamath County in Oregon in 1947. After attempting to eradicate their coyote population, they soon found themselves infested by rodents, experiencing the poetic truth that “you don't know what you've got till it's gone.”