The Truth About Coyote Conflicts

Regarding coyotes, there is going to be a conflict now and then -- that doesn't mean we should kill them all. Conflict is part and parcel of daily life. Humans deal with conflicts every day of their lives -- there are constant disagreements and rubbing each other the wrong way. Some of those erupt into bigger fights. This is the nature of being individuals. We need to extend this understanding to wild animals. We need to think in terms of inclusion, not exclusion.

Human attacks on Coyotes

Humans kill hundreds of thousands of coyotes every year. They are shot from planes and helicopters. They are injured and maimed in steel-jaw, leg-hold traps, suffocated to death in neck snares, and pups are gassed to death in their dens. Most of this killing is carried out by the Federal Wildlife Services of the US Agricultural Department. In most states, coyotes are killed for sport all year round without limits. They are also killed by unenlightened farmers and ranchers who do not realize that the best way to protect livestock is to reinforce fencing and use guard animals i.e., llamas, donkeys and guard-dogs. These measures have been proven to be more effective than killing coyotes. Some states offer incentives such as bounties on coyotes to encourage killing; however, bounties do not solve the true problem: the animals that are killed may or may not have been the offending animals. And since bounties offer monetary reward, it is often abused. Paradoxically, despite all these efforts, the coyote population increases rather than decreases in response to the extermination attempts.

Within urban neighborhoods, humans continue to hire trappers rather than to remove attractants and or keep cats and small dogs out of harm’s way. Alternative methods featuring education have been found to be the most effective method of resolving and managing coyote conflicts in urban areas. One of the most detrimental types of "attacks" by humans is in the form of unfounded rumors which spin out of control to become fear-mongering urban legends. This fear has driven numerous communities to trap and kill large numbers of coyotes in an area.

Dog Attacks on Coyotes In Urban Areas

It is in any green space -- along our creeks, next to residences and golf courses, and in urban parks -- areas shared by dog walkers and wildlife alike -- that dogs regularly pursue coyotes unless they are restrained, and there are always a few dog-owners who allow this behavior. Dogs may get their haunches nipped by the coyote as a warning, and depending on whether there are pups the coyotes are protecting, there may be a fight. Small dogs that chase coyotes are often killed. Injury and loss of a dog can be prevented by the dog-owners, simply by being respectful of the other animals that share the environment with us, and by keeping their dogs on a leash.

Coyote Aggression

Coyote attacks on humans are extremely rare. When injuries do occur, it’s on account of trying to feed the coyote by hand, or by trying to break up a coyote-dog interaction, during which the owner may be nicked, bitten or scratched by either their dog or the coyote. Coyotes along with other urban wildlife are often considered nuisances, merely as a result of having been seen. Fingers often point in their direction as culprits for crimes without any supporting evidence. Every year Animal Control receives calls from people who have just seen a coyote, and the reports go so far as to describe the coyote as “bold,” or "aggressive" even though, when asked, we are told that it is just standing there. Many people are not familiar with normal coyote behavior, so misconceptions and fears often result. Coyotes are almost always defending their territories when they become antagonistic with dogs. They have very little interest in humans and would rather avoid us.
If there is a chance encounter where a coyote comes closer than expected, it is easy to scare it away by stepping towards it and clapping your hands loudly, or by throwing a small pebble in its direction. If you have a newspaper handy, slap it on your thigh as you head toward the coyote. If the coyote does not respond, it’s best to just back out of the area and leave -- she may be defending a den or pups which are close by. If the coyote holds its ground, and growls at you like a dog, you can bet she has a den or pups nearby. It is simply trying to protect them, just as humans protect their children. Do not try and scare it off, just back out of the area and leave. This is the correct human response whether you are alone or with your dog.

Coyotes and Dogs

Many dog-coyote encounters have been framed as "coyote attacks," and don’t explain the vast majority of dog-coyote interactions. Coyotes may see all dogs as possible threats to their pups, and their personal space and safety, or as competition for limited resources. Where a dog’s safety is concerned, size does matter. A smaller dog may be seen as both a threat and as prey, and, to a coyote, they are less risky to approach than larger dogs. Small dogs have been taken by coyotes even while they were leashed. So, keep your small dog on a leash and pick it up and carry it if you see a coyote.

Coyotes would rather not interact with humans and/or their dogs. Dogs are the biggest threat to coyotes in their urban habitats -- it is best to keep them apart. There can be antagonistic visual communication between dogs and coyotes, and sometimes hyperactive dogs can be threatening to coyotes. This is why it’s important to keep your dog on a leash at all times. The coyote may just decide to leave or begin a long-distressed yipping session when threatened.

But depending on the proximity of your dog to the coyote, the coyote may resort to a charge- and- retreat sequence, lips pulled back into a snarly face, arched back, scratching the ground. This display is clear communication to the dog to back off, but can be quite frightening for the dog owner. If this happens, the correct response is to leash the dog and calmly leave the area with your dog -- and do not run, otherwise, you may be chased. When a dog and owner do not pay attention to this clear messaging to back off, the coyote may nip the dog’s haunches to get the message across. Negative encounters can be prevented by understanding the behavior of coyotes and staying out of areas during times when there may be dens and pups. Signage should be posted in areas where coyotes have been seen so that humans can take extra precautions with their dogs.

Coyotes and Small Pets

Coyotes indeed are known to have taken cats and small dogs, almost all of which were not closely attended. Coyotes do not know that these animals are your beloved pets – they are just small prey to a coyote, the same as any other raccoon or opossum. If coyotes have been seen in the area, please don’t allow your cats to roam, and don’t leave your small dogs indoors unattended. Also reinforce the cage that you leave your outdoor bunny or other small animals in.

Is it safe to let children play outside unattended?

Unless your child is older, he or she should never be left unattended for any number of reasons, including two-legged predators and domestic dogs which send 1,000 people to the emergency rooms in the US daily. When there are coyotes in the area, child-play must be supervised at all times. Teenagers are tall and big enough not to be mistaken for prey. It is also important to teach children to respect and not approach coyotes and other wild animals, and to enjoy them from a distance.

Are dogs, cats and children safe within a fenced yard?

It would depend on the type of fencing. However, free-roaming chickens and bunnies, cats and small dogs have been taken by hawks and owls, no matter how secure the fence is. Please contact us for more information regarding the type of fencing and how to modify existing fencing to coyote-proof your enclosed backyard.

*Please note that any injured or obviously diseased animal should be reported to your animal control department -- suffering animals behave out of the norm and are unpredictable.

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