



The New York Times |

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Taking Walks on the Wild Side

By SUSAN SWARD MARCH 13, 2010

Janet Kessler, a 60-year-old, self-taught naturalist, leaves her cozy cottage in the Noe Valley section of San Francisco before dawn several days a week and walks to parks and other open spaces in hope of spotting coyotes, owls and other wildlife. Since she began photographing coyotes in the city three years ago, she has taken pictures of 11 different coyotes in four city parks. She wrote a small book — “Myca of Twin Peaks” — about one of the coyotes. Her work is chronicled on her Web site, urbanwildness.com. On a recent hike, she shared her views on animals and humans. (Her words have been edited and condensed.) **SUSAN SWARD**

THE CALM OF DARKNESS Before the sun comes up, the darkness has a calm to it and a wildness, too. You feel this awakening. It’s at this time that many of the animals I watch are waking up, and some are going to sleep. It’s a changing of the guard.

AN UNSEEN WORLD Most people living here are unaware of this tremendous part of the city where animals go about living their own lives. Many don’t want to see coyotes — and all animals — as similar to us. But they have a family life as all-encompassing as ours.

COYOTES IN THE CITY We've been told that coyotes are here to stay in urban environments, and people need to realize that coyotes, though they generally are not aggressive, are wild animals. It is very important never to feed them because there seems to be a connection between feeding them and their eventual aggression toward humans.

PEOPLE AND COYOTES A small percent of people don't like coyotes and don't think they should be in the city. But most of us love the juxtaposition of urban and wild. It's that contradiction that is so compelling.

THOREAU'S THOUGHT On my Web site I quote Thoreau's observation "In wildness is the preservation of the world." I agree with that. Keeping ourselves grounded in nature is what it's all about, and the modern technological aspects of life distance us from the nature we are a part of.

A version of this article appears in print on March 14, 2010, on page A29A of the National edition with the headline: Taking Walks on the Wild Side.