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urban coyotes have lives

text and photos by Janet Kessler

Coyotes are moving into urban areas. They are bridging the seeming contradiction between urban and wild — and in so doing, they are creating a much more balanced ecosystem for us all. What a thrill if you encounter one!

Coyotes tend to be shy of humans, so a glimpse now and then is all most of us can expect. I'm lucky enough to have been allowed by some coyotes to watch them — aided by a mutual respect that developed slowly over time. I want to share some of my observations, to let everyone know about some of their many different behaviors — behaviors which most of us don't see — and to show how similar in many ways they are to us. We are all critters on this earth with very similar feelings and needs going on — this is the connection.

meet the new kids on the block

I observe coyotes as individuals. WHO are they? They are native only to the Americas. Your average little coyote is cunning, intelligent, curious, playful, protective, adventurous, independent, self-reliant, self-sufficient, has family values, a frontier spirit and strong individuality. Hey, aren't these the same rugged characteristics in which we ourselves take pride?

They also exhibit some "softer" characteristics such as affection, care, happiness, patience, timidity, dejection. Included in this article are some photos showing fun things about coyotes to help everyone get in touch again and feel connected to the wilderness in our midst and our own human natures.

follow the rules

A little precaution is all you need to coexist with coyotes. One thing we see in nature is that other animals' rules are often different from our own. Learning about animals' behavior and their rules, and then balancing these with our own might be the first step towards sharing the environment. A little bit of effort and understanding on our part can engender a lot more fun and a feeling of connection when we finally do encounter wildlife. Maybe we can learn to fit in again rather than to dominate with our own needs and expectations.

It is relevant to know that coyotes are living their own lives and are not too concerned with people. They will do their utmost to avoid humans. So an encounter along a path is going to be simply a chance occurrence — the coyote may look at you out of curiosity before it flees. If you want it to move faster, make a racket to shoo it off.

The few instances of coyote aggression toward humans are known to be caused almost exclusively by humans feeding them or taming them through feeding. What is freely given eventually becomes aggressively demanded: never feed a coyote!

But also don't approach them — give them the space they need to feel safe. If one comes too close, again, shoo it off with a racket of noise. Tossing pebbles in their direction — not at them — is also an effective deterrent. If you have a jacket or sweater, flapping it at them can also be a deterrent.

coyotes and dogs

Dogs pose a totally different set of circumstances for coyotes than do humans. Coyotes see dogs as intruders who might want to claim their turf. Coyotes are territorial, so they have a prerogative and a vested interest in the territories that provide them with the food and shelter they need to survive. Keeping our dogs restrained on a short leash, and "moving on" is the best policy in coyote territory. We can coexist by giving in just a little in this manner.

reputation vs. reality

Although they can be fierce fighters, coyotes are, generally speaking, far less dangerous than dogs. For perspective, in any given year there are only about 27 coyote bites in the entire United States. The bites rarely cause severe injury because of the coyote's small size. In comparison, more than 1,000 dog bites send people to hospital emergency rooms **daily**. Coyote reputations should be brought in line with reality.

This being said, keeping one's distance gives both coyotes and humans a feeling of safety, and small children must always be kept away from wild animals.

If a coyote/dog incident does occur, distract the coyote by making a loud racket, grab your dog, leash it, and move on so as to minimize visual and body-language communication between the two animals.

Coyote pupping season, which begins in March, is when such incidents are more likely to occur, though they have occurred at other times. Pet food and garbage left out in the open and within easy reach serve as an open invitation to animals looking for food — remove the invitation to discourage uninvited guests. And, all pets, but especially small ones, need to be kept indoors as a safety precaution.

Janet Kessler is a naturalist who has been observing and photographing urban coyote behavior and urban coexistence issues since 2007. Her photo "Triple Take" won first prize in its category in WildCare's 2010 Living with Wildlife Photo Contest. To see more of Janet's work, visit her blog about coyote behavior, personality, coexistence and advocacy [coyotevipps](#), and her website about wildlife in this area: <http://www.urbanwildness.com>

coyotes in the news

A recent letter to the Marin IJ editor, "Too Many Coyotes," suggested that coyotes were getting out of control in Marin County and should be managed by culling, another name for killing (relocation of wild animals doesn't work and is illegal in California.) The response in this letter is based on fear and possibly anger, but isn't backed up by science or history. The truth is we have been waging war on coyotes since Europeans came to this continent, and, other than creating occupations for exterminators, it hasn't worked. It has only improved the coyote. In his book, *Coyotes: Predators and Survivors* (1983), Charles Cadieux, a predator control specialist for the U.S. government, describes all the techniques used to kill coyotes, and admits none has worked.

[Coyotes are responsive breeders](#). Left to themselves, they will manage their own numbers, because they are still canines, and don't like other canines to get too close — even other Coyotes. When a pack is established and stable, only the alpha male and female will reproduce. Extended family members only support the alphas. If an alpha is killed, all females in the pack will respond by breeding lots more coyotes.

Learn more about coyotes and this issue in [WildCare's Living with Wildlife blog at marinij.com](#).



Coyotes are fascinated by activity, especially that of dogs, and may spend hours observing them.



Coyotes are resourceful in their hunting methods — here one is up in a tree!



Barking in distress after being chased by dogs is not the same as joyful howling.



Nose diving with heels kicking high is effective in hunting!



Coyotes have a lot of personality and numerous of facial expressions.



Coyotes love to play -- here they are playing chase



There is always a lot of affection blatantly displayed in coyote families.



Self-entertainment is common: here chasing one's tail fills the bill