



OPINION | LEILA PHILIP

Learning from the pesky, adaptive, remarkable coyotes



MITCH ZUKOFF

A coyote pauses in a Waban yard in January.

By Leila Philip

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This past November, a coyote was seen trotting through the suburbs of Newton with a large cat in its mouth. And so the Boston area joins Chicago, Los Angeles, Denver, and every city throughout the country as home for urban coyotes. An interaction with *Canis latrans* is now the most prevalent urban wildlife encounter in the United States. Coyotes lounge on lawn chairs in Los Angeles and mingle with ticket lines at Wrigley Field in Chicago. One was even spotted riding a train in Portland, Ore. But despite media alarm,

which depicts this as a new phenomenon, urban coyotes are not new in American history; in fact, coyotes have been a presence in cities dating back to Mesoamerica.

Today urban coyotes challenge our concepts of what it means to live in a city and how we consider wildlife. We have come to think of cities as places where humans can escape animal predators, yet coyotes are an example of what biologists call a synanthropic species – a creature that thrives in the particular ecosystems created by urban development. The fact is, humans (and especially our trash) have always brought with us what coyotes want – food – mostly in the form of mice and voles, which constitute 85 percent of a coyote’s natural diet, though they also eat domesticated sheep and cattle. And yes, cats and small dogs are heartbreakingly easy prey for even a small coyote. They will rarely challenge humans, however; there have been only two recorded coyote attacks that ended in human fatality: one of a three-year-old girl in the Los Angeles area in 1981 and the other a female hiker in Cape Breton Highlands National Park, in Nova Scotia, in 2009.

When the first New World explorers arrived in North America, coyote range was limited to Western deserts and prairies, but Europeans immediately set about exterminating the coyote’s main predator, the timber wolf, which created new territory for the smaller creatures, who are so good at adapting to new types of environments that biologists have labeled them a “cosmopolitan” species (like us). It took only a few hundred years for coyotes to colonize the entire North American continent.

The coyote’s success is even more extraordinary given the massive campaigns we have waged to eradicate them. As early as 1850, trading posts stocked strychnine, a deadly poison, for westward travelers to leave in carrion to poison coyote and wolves. States enacted coyote bounties and, at times, mass killings. In 1931, the Animal Damage Control Act promoted the elimination of all predators from the American landscape. Even as late as the 1970s, there were crazy wildlife eugenic plans to build coyote-proof border walls to limit coyote range (ironically, to protect the genetic purity of red wolves, which were on the endangered-species list and showed a propensity to mate with coyotes).

Given the resiliency, work ethic, and perseverance of the coyote, you would think this native “prairie wolf” would have become an American icon. After all, the species sums up so many of our most beloved ideas about what it means to be American. In fact, the opposite is true. Recent culture wars have further polarized attitudes toward this animal,

radically different positions on how to manage them. One side tends to consider their remarkable migration from the Western prairies to the Eastern forests as evidence that they don't belong and should be removed. The other side looks at the coyote's migration as evidence of an extraordinary adaptability.

One of the main reasons that lethal force has not eliminated the coyote from America is that coyotes have the ability to manage their population. When there is less food (usually because of competition from neighboring coyote packs), females have smaller litters, sometimes as few as two pups rather than the normal litter size of five to seven. When food sources increase (usually because other coyote packs have moved on or been killed), females go into reproductive overdrive, producing as many as 19 pups per litter.

Scientists working on aspects of climate change are increasingly interested in these and other coyote behaviors, which taken together exhibit traits of what they call rapid adaptive behavior — a key for species survival in this era of environmental instability. Instead of continuing our hubris in thinking we can remove urban coyotes from cities and from the larger narrative of American wildlife history, we'd be smart to learn from them.

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