

Humans and Coyotes: Living Together, St. Louis Region by the MO Dept of Conservation

The number-one wildlife-related phone call received by Missouri Department of Conservation employees in the St. Louis Region involves coyotes. Coyotes have been reported throughout all urban and rural areas of our three-county region (St. Louis, St. Charles, and Jefferson Counties). Usually the caller has just seen a coyote for the first time in their neighborhood and is fearful that the coyote is going to harm or kill their pets or children. What people are usually observing is coyotes being coyotes. Rarely is there reason for alarm, but people need to be respectful of them and follow the same precautions as with any other wild animal. Several common sense strategies are useful in discouraging coyotes from an area and serve to minimize the chance for coyote human interactions. However, it is also helpful to be informed about coyote behavior and habitat requirements as well as the history of the coyote in Missouri in order to fully understand the scope of the urban coyote situation.

First, is it a coyote you're seeing? Foxes, wolves and coy dogs (cross between a coyote and a dog) are sometimes mistaken as coyotes. The coyote (*Canis latrans*) resembles a German Shepard dog but is lighter in color, has yellow slanting eyes, longer legs and a more prominent point to the nose and ears. Most coyotes are gray to blond, but some show a rust or brown coloration and have a bushy tail that is tipped with black. Adult male coyotes weigh up to 35 pounds and stand 30 to 35 inches at the shoulder. The female is usually four-fifths as large. Vocalizations are very high-pitched wails, sharp howls and "screams", which go up and down scale very rapidly. They have often been reported as "a sound like something being killed." Coyotes can be seen traveling alone or in pairs. On occasion large groups are present, but there are no data as to whether or not they hunt in packs.

The reality is that coyotes are here. They have been making a living in and around the St. Louis area long before there was a St. Louis. Coyotes are found all over the state and in all types of habitat from the Ozark forests to the northern crop fields and the southeast lowlands to populated subdivisions of major metropolitan areas. In recent years, as urban expansion has invaded natural and agricultural areas, the frequency of human coyote interactions has increased. Contrary to popular belief, coyotes are not necessarily being displaced due to urban development and in many instances it is the development itself that attracts the animal.

The preferred habitat for coyotes is a prairie or grassland habitat that provides the food and shelter they most desire. Coyotes are opportunistic feeders. Their diet consists mostly of small mammals such as rabbits, mice, carrion, fruits, plants and sometimes small pets, livestock or human refuse. Many urban areas, due to the abundance of green space, have high populations of the prey animals most preferred by coyotes (small rodents and rabbits) as well as places that offer escape cover and shelter for den sites. It is not uncommon to see urban coyotes active during daylight hours and in close proximity to humans. This is because urban coyotes are very accustomed to the presence and activities of people. In rural areas, coyotes are more active at night and tend to shy away from humans.

What are some of the public health concerns with urban coyotes? To this date, there have been no documented cases of coyotes attacking people in Missouri, but incidences of human attacks have been documented elsewhere in the U.S. in recent years in which children have been seriously injured. Some small pets such as cats and dogs have been attacked. No incidence of rabies has been found in Missouri coyotes in recent years. Canine distemper virus does occur and somewhat mimics neurological symptoms of rabies (convulsions, tremors, loss of fear). Distemper is not transmissible to humans, but pets should be vaccinated. Sarcoptic mange outbreaks are common and cause the animal to lose patches of fur resulting in an overall "mangy" appearance. Coyotes can also suffer from heart worms, hookworms, canine hepatitis and parvo virus. In order to minimize transmission of any wildlife disease, wear protective gloves when touching a coyote carcass or feces, wear shoes when outside and wash after any contact.

What are some ways to minimize the possibility of a negative coyote interaction? Seeing a coyote in your neighborhood is not necessarily a reason for alarm. Treat coyotes like any other animal that is being a nuisance. The following is a list of behaviors you can follow to minimize interactions:

- DO NOT leave small or defenseless children unattended in yards, especially if they are known to be frequented by coyotes
- DO NOT let cats and small dogs out at night unless accompanied by a person
- DO NOT intentionally or unintentionally feed coyotes (bring in pet food, secure garbage, keep yards clean and free of refuse and brush)
- DO obey leash laws
- DO fence in yards
- DO keep outside areas for pets well lit
- DO harass or chase coyotes to make them feel unwelcome in your area
- DO encourage coyote trapping and hunting in season (if permitted by local ordinances)

When coyotes are causing damage people want the problem corrected, but don't always want the coyote killed. Catching and relocating any wildlife species is not recommended. Relocation of nuisance animals is ineffective management and often results in the death of the animal due to the stress of trapping and an unfamiliarity with the relocation area causing the animal to be more susceptible to predation and less successful than resident animals when competing for food. Further, many animals may simply try to travel back to where they were taken from (especially a dog-like animal such as a coyote).

Coyotes are a legally protected fur-bearer and game animal. There are set hunting and trapping seasons for coyotes (see MO Wildlife Code for specific dates). A truly nuisance coyote, "... which beyond reasonable doubt is damaging property may be killed by the owner of the property being damaged, or by his/her representative at any time and without permit, but only by shooting or trapping except by written authorization of the director..." according to the Missouri Wildlife Code 3CSR10-4.130 Owner May Protect Property.

When lethal measures are taken, it is often only necessary to remove one animal; the one creating the nuisance. Trapping is the most common way to catch or remove coyotes. Traps placed by a knowledgeable and experienced trapper are much more likely to catch coyotes than those set by people with no trapping experience. The most widely used and successful method of trapping coyotes involves the use of leg hold traps. Most people think leg hold traps are cruel and inhumane, but when the proper size trap is used in conjunction with the proper set, the trap serves only to hold the animal. If released, the animal should show no signs of serious or permanent injury. Also, non-target animals are rarely caught when the proper size trap and set are used. Snares can be effective but absolutely require written permission from a Missouri Department of Conservation Wildlife Damage Biologist or Conservation Agent. Cage style traps can be used but are typically considered very inefficient as most coyotes will not readily enter a cage trap. Additionally, a cage style trap may catch many non-target animals. There are numerous laws and regulations governing the use of traps. Please refer to Chapter 8 of the current "Wildlife Code of Missouri."

Hunting and/or trapping does not guarantee that you will never have coyote damage again, but by removing the boldest damage-causing or nuisance coyote(s) you may change the behavior and thus the habits of the remaining coyotes. However, as long as coyotes are present in an area the potential for problems exists. Careful observation of local coyote habits should help you to decide when you might encourage an in-season hunting or trapping harvest to help keep coyote numbers or habits in check, or should help you to decide if there is a specific problem coyote that needs to be removed. Always check with the ordinances of your municipality regarding the legality of certain methods for hunting or trapping coyotes before you begin. If you have questions regarding nuisance coyote removal, contact your local MDC Wildlife Damage Biologist or Conservation Agent.

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