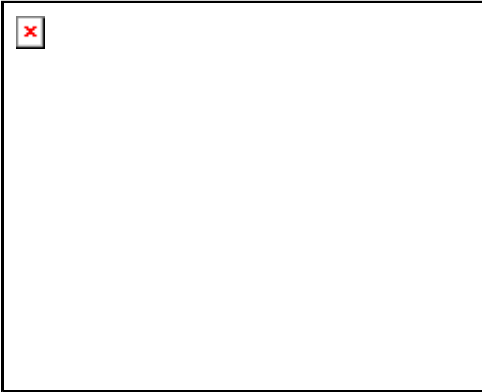


Scientist makes case for coyotes

By CYNTHIA McCORMICK
STAFF WRITER

It's a scene that is more pastoral than wild.

In a dusky green field somewhere in Barnstable, a magnificently furred female coyote bows and stretches, unaware that she's being caught on video by field researcher Jonathan Way.



■ Coyotes, such as this juvenile scampering across a marsh off Indian Trail Road in Barnstable, have established a permanent population on the Cape numbering about 150 animals.
(Staff photo by Kevin Mingora)

Around her prance tail-wagging pups that look remarkably like juvenile German shepherds. An older offspring - a yearling - teasingly attempts to suckle.

It turns out the doting mother didn't have long to live.

"She and her mate ended up being shot one and a half years ago," Way says. It was a snowy day in February, the last day of hunting season, and the hunter used a wounded rabbit call to attract the pair.

Many Cape Codders view coyotes, which are known to eat cats and maul small dogs, with a mixture of wonder and anxiety. Way sees the wild canines as a fascinating, if recent, part of the local ecosystem.

Coyotes are the only predator on the Cape large enough to eat deer, though smaller mammals

including mice are more likely to be on the menu.

"Coyotes make the ecological system really whole," Way said. "For our long-term human sustainability, that's important."

If he has his way, Barnstable and other towns will impose a moratorium on the four-month coyote hunting season.

Way, the only person in the state who has done a long-term field study of coyotes, theorizes that killing coyotes only increases their numbers and makes pet-coyote interactions more inevitable.

It seems like the inverse of logic. But Way says every time a coyote is shot by a hunter or killed by a car, its territory is invaded by younger, often transient coyotes who divvy it up like suburban developers.

Coyote Facts

1 Coyotes moved into the central and western parts of Massachusetts in the 1950s. They have been on Cape Cod since the 1970s. They live in every part of Massachusetts except Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket and have been spotted in downtown Boston and New York City.

- Coyotes look like a smallish wolf with a somewhat foxy, pointed nose. They have long, thick fur, often a combination of tan, gray, white and black. Their bushy tails

When this happens, a typical pack of three to six coyotes goes from a range of 10 square miles to one as small as 5 square miles.

Recent attacks

Way wants the public to get to know coyotes the way he has - to learn males make solicitous fathers and that coyotes howl for joy as well as to communicate.

"I want to turn the tide to make coyotes more appreciated," said Way, who has radio-collared and tracked coyotes on Cape Cod and in the Boston area for several years. He is writing a book on his experiences with the wild canines, tentatively titled "Suburban Howls."

By some accounts, a hunting moratorium would be a tough sell.

Letters to the editor of the Cape Cod Times claim coyotes have killed hundreds of cats on the Cape since they first made their way to the peninsula about 30 years ago.

Coyote attacks on humans are extremely rare, but two out of three of the state's confirmed attacks occurred here on Cape Cod.

In 1998, a coyote snatched a 3-year-old boy from a swingset in Sandwich. His mother intervened and the boy was not badly injured.

In February 2005, a Marstons Mills woman was bitten by a rabid coyote as she tried to shoot it away from her tethered dog. In that case, the dog wasn't bitten. But pet owners and veterinarians report numerous coyote attacks on dogs, particularly small canines.

Cape Animal Referral and Emergency Service, a 24-hour veterinary practice in Dennis, has dealt with 10 to 12 dogs that were apparently attacked by coyotes in the past six weeks, according to medical director Paul Hendricks.

Half of the dogs died, Hendricks said. "Some have gone home - often with pretty big medical bills. They were pretty chewed up."

At least three of the attacks occurred in the daytime. In one case the owner reported the offending coyote jumped over a 4-foot fence to attack her dog.

The fatalities all involved dogs smaller than 40 pounds, Hendricks said. But larger animals are not immune from attack.

are tipped with black.

- Adults typically weigh between 33 and 47 pounds. The heaviest recorded coyote weight on Cape Cod is 55 pounds, and coyote weights in Vermont have gone up to 72 pounds.

- Coyotes are opportunistic feeders and will eat garbage and pet food left outdoors. Their primary foods include small rodents, rabbits, white-tail deer, birds, snakes, frogs and insects. Many domestic cats also have fallen prey to coyotes, and there is a confirmed eye witness report of a coyote killing a nearly full-size harp seal on Nauset Beach in Orleans.

- Coyotes are known as elusive creatures. Male and female coyotes pair up and establish a territory ranging from 5 to 10 square miles. They breed in February or March. Four to eight pups are born in dens in April or May. The pack can include older siblings from the previous year and typically consists of three to four adults.

- Coyotes don't hibernate and can be active night or day, although they are most commonly sighted at dawn and dusk. During the night, they may patrol their territories, ranging 10 to 12 miles.

- There are about 150 resident coyotes on Cape Cod and at least 50 "transient" coyotes passing through.

- The Barnstable area is home to six to eight packs of coyotes. They view domestic dogs and foxes as competition for territory.

- To keep domestic animals safe from coyotes, state officials recommend that all cats be kept indoors and that dogs be restrained by a leash or fencing.

- They also say people should secure their garbage and keep compost in containers that don't allow animals to break in.

- Fallen bird seed and fruit also may attract coyotes, so officials recommend keeping those areas clean.

Source: Information provided by MassWildlife and Jonathan Way

One or more coyotes bit a Siberian husky tangled in its lead in the wee hours of April 1, according to the dog's owner, Melissa Mason of West Falmouth, who was awakened by yelps. Mason was surprised at all the puncture wounds: "He's a big dog."

A Harwich woman, Mary Jo Keenan, is thinking of starting a support and information group since her dog, Bear, was killed April 8.

Keenan and her husband, Ken, were taking their evening stroll around the perimeter of their small property with their three dogs when Bear, a Sheltie/chihuahua mix, disappeared.

After an hour's search of adjoining woods, they found his body. He had a gaping wound in his hindquarters and had been eviscerated. The vet said it was a coyote attack.

"My husband and I still walk our yard, trying to piece together what happened, not understanding how it could have occurred," Keenan wrote in an e-mail. "What was once a safe haven for you and your family members, both pet and human, is gone."

And early Monday night, a small dog who'd escaped her fenced-in backyard was unfortunate enough to run into at least four coyotes on territory patrol in Marstons Mills. Two of the coyotes growled as the pet sitter came out the front door. The returning dog charged them and was mortally wounded.

Living in smaller territories

Bette Hecox-Lea and Charles Lea of Falmouth have proposed clearing brush or otherwise discouraging coyotes from living near downtown Falmouth.

Some Massachusetts residents have asked the state to expand the coyote hunting season, which starts Nov. 1 and ends Feb. 28, and to locate a check station for tagging pelts on Cape Cod.

A state Division of Wildlife and Fisheries review of coyote hunting regulations should be complete by mid-July, said Colleen Olfenbittel, the division's fur bearer biologist. During the 2005-2006 hunting season, Massachusetts hunters killed 189 coyotes, including 39 on the Cape.

At the state's last estimation several years ago, there were between 4,000 and 6,000 coyotes living in the commonwealth.

"We have a very healthy coyote population that can sustain a hunt," Olfenbittel said.

But Way maintains that hunting and killing only makes the coyote situation worse. "When an old coyote dies, a year later there are twice as many coyotes," said Way, whose radio tracking documents coyotes traveling 10 to 15 miles a night, often along power lines and railroad tracks.

"I think it's transients settling in. They seem to just set up shop in part of the territory," he said. "So now you have coyotes living in smaller territories of 5 to 8 square miles."

There are about 150 resident coyotes on Cape Cod and at least 50 transients jockeying for territory alongside them, Way estimates.

There's another reason he doesn't want to see coyotes shot: state regulations do not prevent

hunters from targeting radio-collared animals.

With the radio collar, "A coyote transforms from an urban phantom to a potential 24-hour data bank," said Way, who got his Ph.D in science education from Boston College last fall and is now teaching at Barnstable High School, his alma mater.

Way's funding comes from private sources, and he is hoping to build a coyote museum on Cape Cod, which would include a living exhibit of coyotes he raised from pups that are now at the Stone Zoo.

Way admits he's attached to the coyotes he studies. He knows their personalities, their territories, and their life histories. There's Caspar, a nearly white female coyote who outweighs all other recorded wild canines on Cape Cod at 55 pounds. The 10-year-old was run off part of her territory by a younger coyote, but she's holding her own in a section of South Yarmouth.

"These stories just kind of end the moment these animals are shot or otherwise killed," Way said.

Way had to ease up on his capture and release program while finishing his doctorate, but he plans to re-embark on the mission with science students from Barnstable High School.

This spring's attacks on dogs are probably connected to adult coyotes being particularly territorial as females give birth in April and May. "They see dogs as competition," Way said.

Sightings by humans are sure to increase in June and July, when family packs move from dens to more open, above-ground spaces.

But coyotes remain mysterious creatures, fading in and out of shadows, brush and woods.

"Even our radio-collared animals aren't seen that often," Way said. "You might say, 'I see them all the time,' but they are still elusive."

That means when people go looking for coyotes, they often don't find them. Even when coyotes trot across the street in full daylight, nobody knows where they go - except perhaps Jonathan Way.

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