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Coyotes Join Wildlife Migration to Cities **CHICAGO AREA IS HOME TO GROWING NUMBERS OF COYOTES**

SPRINGFIELD, ILL. -- Chicagoans talk passionately about Da' Bears and Cubs, but there is a new, growing presence in Chicagoland: da' coyotes -- not a sports team, but the real four-legged critters.

Coyotes have given rise to some controversy. Some Chicagoans enjoy chances to watch their antics in the urban wild. Others praise coyotes' skills in controlling geese, deer and rodents that over-run golf courses, parks and gardens.

But others complain when their house pets turn up missing.

"A delicate balance definitely exists between good and bad impacts when coyotes come to town," says Dr. Stan Gehrt, a wildlife biologist and professor at Ohio State University. "There's no way to minimize how people feel when the family cat doesn't come home." Gehrt is in charge of ongoing studies to monitor urban coyotes in the Chicago area; studies started when he worked at the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation in Dundee, Illinois.

Gehrt began studies in Cook County when residents began noticing more coyotes in urban areas near fields and wild areas. A few cats and dogs disappeared, and biologists decided it was time to understand more about the situation. Research focuses on population dynamics, movement patterns, coyote health and mortality factors, and recommendations for urban management. The studies continue for another two years.

Coyotes once were rare in Illinois. As many as 30 years ago, coyote populations were low due to now-defunct eradication programs. Coyotes have proliferated since then, moving from the western U.S. into eastern habitat where wolves used to be. Coyotes are adaptable and can live almost anywhere. Chicago is a case in point.

"Surprisingly, in Chicago there is plenty of food for coyotes," Gehrt notes. "Coyotes help stem urban deer over-population -- a serious concern to vehicle drivers, gardeners and park managers. In some areas, coyotes take 70 to 80 percent of urban fawns each year. Also, anyone who has battled throngs of cranky Canada geese or slipped on a blanket of droppings in the park knows that geese often are a problem. Coyotes eat goose eggs, goslings and occasionally nesting adults."

Gehrt continues, "Some golf course managers are glad to see coyotes because they feed on rodents that often damage wiring and dig holes. It is quite entertaining to watch a coyote pouncing and playing in a field near office buildings and homes. From that standpoint, coyotes provide a great service."

And about house pets?

“It’s true,” Gehrt admits. “Coyotes living near residential areas sometimes snatch house pets. Roaming cats and smaller dogs are at risk in coyote habitat, which includes fields, parks and woods.”

He notes that people sometimes demand eradication of coyotes. But eliminating all coyotes is not practical, economical or workable. Research shows that once coyotes are removed, others quickly replace them. Therefore, widespread removal is a temporary solution. “Only a few coyotes take domestic pets,” Gehrt says. “When an offending coyote is identified, a nuisance control specialist can remove it. The best thing that a pet owner can do is take precautions to keep a pet safe and not encourage coyotes to come near. Humans shouldn’t encourage coyotes; it only lessens their fear of pets and people.

Steps for keeping pets safe, if your home is near coyote habitat, include:

1. Don’t feed any wild animals such as raccoons or deer, which encourages coyotes as well.
2. Keep cats indoors at all times.
3. Keep your dog on a leash.
4. Don’t leave cat or dog food outside.
5. Secure garbage in areas where coyotes can’t access it; keep yards clean of refuse and brush.
6. Do not let pets out at night unless accompanied by a person.

“Coyotes usually are nocturnal and often live near people, but people often never know they are there,” Gehrt explains. “Most coyotes are harmless; their goal is to eat more natural foods such as mice and rabbits. However, coyotes are opportunistic. If coyotes see easy food – such as open garbage -- and aren’t afraid, they may take advantage. That puts pets in direct line for confrontation with pets. Coyotes aren’t interested in eating pets, these are territorial disputes.”

Coyotes maintain healthy numbers in urban areas. About 30 percent of country-living coyotes live to see a new year; in the city, that survival rate is 58 percent. Diseases have little impact on urban coyotes; their biggest cause of death is automobiles.

Trappers and hunters have some effect on rural coyote populations. “There are a number of sportsman’s clubs dedicated to coyote hunting in Illinois. People hunt and trap them for their pelts and to decrease their numbers. Hunting and trapping provide many benefits, especially in helping maintain a balance between coyotes and people,” Gehrt says.

“I have a couple recommendations for Chicagoans,” Gehrt intones. “Follow simple precautions to keep your pets safe, and enjoy watching these urban wonders when you get a chance. They really are quite amazing.”

For more information on coyotes in Illinois, contact Illinois DNR at 217-782-6384.