

Urban Coyotes Stalk Pets *December 10, 2009 | AZPM*

Story By Clayton Norman

The tooth-pocked ulna of a small mammal protrudes from the sand in Rillito Wash. On Fairview Avenue a tattered flyer—picture of a missing puppy – flutters in a breeze.

Canis latrans is among us.

The coyote is a marvel of adaptability. Even as human development threatens other species the coyote has expanded its range to inhabit almost every corner of North American—including the cities. Los Angeles, Chicago, and Tucson all have urban coyote populations that have been the subject of scientific studies. Many people may thrill to watch a coyote trot through their yard. But when coyotes start living in close proximity to humans, and their pets, clashes ensue.

Jessica Simpson knows about urban coyotes.

In September the singer watched a coyote streak across her lawn and catch up her maltipoo, Daisy, in its jaws. Despite a tearful media campaign by Simpson the coyote declined to return the dog. But coyote/pet predation is not limited to the rarefied air of Hollywood. Evidence of it can be seen tacked to telephone poles across Tucson and in the desiccated piles of bone and fur scattered about Rillito Wash.

Catherine Dellorto, a veterinarian at Sabino Veterinary Care in Northeast Tucson patches up pets that have run afoul of coyotes—if they survive.

“It happens regularly,” Dellorto says of coyote attacks on domestic pets. “I’d say it happens to smaller dogs, less than twenty pounds, and cats. Cats don’t usually survive.”

In August Dellorto treated a Yorkshire terrier attacked by two coyotes in front of her owner.

“She was a small dog, about 15 pounds, following her mom who was jogging around a school track,” she says. “Her mom had a weird feeling and turned around. Two coyotes had the dog in their mouths.”

Screaming, the dog’s owner ran at the coyotes who dropped their bloodied victim and fled. The Yorkie was lucky.

“She had two broken ribs, she had an infection,” says Dellorto. The dog spent three days in the hospital and more than a month recovering from its injuries, but not all victims escape so easily.

Because coyotes finish off their victim by tearing out the throat, pets that have survived coyote attacks often have extensive, dangerous injuries.

“Coyotes typically go for the throat,” Dellorto says. “You’ll see injuries to the trachea, or, often times, they will crush the pet’s larynx.”

Tucson’s urban wildlife biologist for the Arizona Game and Fish Department, Locana de Souza, says that anytime coyotes and humans coexist in close proximity to each other there’s likely to be some tension. In the wild, coyotes prey on small mammals like rabbits, rats, and voles. City slicker coyotes follow a similar pattern, but expand their palates beyond that of their provincial cousins to incorporate cosmopolitan delights like cats, kittens, dogs and trash.

“Coyotes being in town is not a problem per se,” de Souza says. “But anywhere you have an interface between wild animals and people there may be problems.”

“The reason animals come into people’s yards is because they are providing, intentionally or unintentionally, something they need like shelter, space or food-- that can include dogs, cats, or trash,” de Souza explains.

De Souza says that there are mixed feelings from Tucsonans when it comes to coyotes in our midst: “You get people who love having them close by and you have people who think they should be eliminated.”

She also says that there are some simple steps pet owners can take to protect their pets. This is good news—especially for cat owners.

A 2005-2006 University of Arizona study using radio collars to track the movements of some of Tucson’s urban coyotes recorded 36 coyote/cat interactions. Nineteen ended in dead cats.

Because outdoor cats and wild coyotes share nocturnal proclivities cats might be slightly more at risk than dogs for coyote attacks. Size plays a factor, too. Cats are the perfect size for a coyote snack, but Dellorto says dogs smaller than 20 pounds are also at risk. Coyotes are known to jump fences and spirit away smaller dogs in a matter of moments.

“People think their dogs are safe in the backyard with a 5-foot fence,” says Dellorto. “But coyotes can jump that no problem.”

Arizona Game and Fish recommends fences at least 6-feet tall to deter coyotes, with the bottoms buried a few inches in the ground to stymie burrowing beneath the fence. Barbed or electrified-wire add extra security to fences.

Ernesto Contreras of St. David plays disc golf every week at the Santa Cruz River Park just west of I-10. He says coyotes are a common sight.

“A few months ago I saw big, pit-bull just hauling butt across the park,” says Contreras scratching the ears of his regular disc-golf companion—a six-year-

old Australian cattle dog named Queenie. "And I thought: 'That pit-bull must be a real wuss to be running like that.'"

Three coyotes charged out of the brush behind the pit-bull and Contreras watched as they hounded the dog. As pack-hunters coyotes often use one pack member as a decoy to hold a victim's attention while the others try to circle around behind their prey.

"They ran around by [hole] number eleven and then the dog got off behind a fence," Contreras says. "The coyotes seemed to lose interest. There's a trash pile over there behind the [Arizona] school [for the Deaf and Blind] and, 'cause they're skinny, they just slipped through the fence and went over there to poke around in the trash."

In their natural environment coyotes go to lengths to avoid human contact. In the city, however, an abundance of human related food sources provide a steady supply of good eats. Trash and pets or pet food left outside might prove enticing enough to draw a coyote into a yard.

"If they lose their natural fear of humans," de Souza says. "Then they look at humans and associate them with a food source and you start to have problems."

In October 2009 two coyotes mauled Canadian folk-singer Taylor Mitchell to death as she hiked in the woods of Nova Scotia. It is one of the only documented fatal coyote attacks on a human.

In 2006 a coyote chomped 8 people in Green Valley over a two-week period. Though the biting was thought to be the work of a single culprit seven coyotes were eventually killed and the biting stopped.

No one agency longitudinally tracks coyote attack data, but between 2000 and 2007 the United States Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services recorded 54 incidents in which Arizona coyotes threatened or made contact with people. Still, de Souza says that coyotes biting humans is a rare occurrence.

When coyotes become a problem wildlife removal specialist Dave "Skunkman" Purwin of goes to work, and these days there is lots of work. "We get calls, I'm going to say two or three a day for coyotes," Purwin says. "Maybe twice that for bobcats."

Like Dellorto, Purwin deals with coyote carnage regularly. That includes the remains of pets and shocked, angry or grieving pet owners.

"People who've lost a pet are either in a very fragile state, or they're violent and angry and want to kill that thing," he says. "When they come outside and find a 30 foot string of intestines across the yard they get upset."

“Coyotes,” he continues. “Like to eat the soft stuff. When we scout an area with high coyote activity we’ll find what’s left of pet cats. Usually they go for the entrails right off—they eat ‘em alive butt-end first.”

Purwin, in step with his “Skunkman” moniker, handles more than just coyote problems. This time of year he says, however, is all about the ghost dog. In fall and early winter coyotes are moving, mating and looking for places to make their dens. Coyotes utilize wildlife corridors such as washes and long, connected stretches of undeveloped property to move with relative ease about town.

“We have so many washes in town,” Purwin says. “And these animals can travel very far if they need too. They move along the washes and then they branch out into neighborhoods and that’s when they become business for me.”

Purwin uses snares, leg-hold traps and, when the situation allows, hunters to eliminate coyotes that have become problematic. He makes a point to mention that urban coyotes are not only pet killers.

“Rogue coyotes do cause a variety of damage,” he says. “They’ll dig up your plants, they’ll eat your pet cat, they’ll dig up your irrigation system and tear up your trashcan.”

To protect yourself and your pets the Arizona Game and Fish department recommends eliminating all intentional or unintentional sources of food from a yard. Food sources can be trash, pet food or pets. A tall fence (at least 6 feet) with barbed wire or other deterrents on the top wire can prevent coyotes from jumping over the fence to get into the yard.

Also, small pets and children should always be supervised in areas where coyotes might be active. If a coyote is seen menacing a child or pet they can often be frightened away by yelling, waving arms, or banging pots and pans together.

It is illegal in Pima County to intentionally feed coyotes or any other type of wildlife other than birds or tree squirrels. The trick to avoiding coyote/human conflict, de Souza says, is to make sure that coyotes do not start to think of humans and their yards as tickets to an easy meal.