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Coyote Sightings on the Rise

By Chris Lavin



This coyote was spotted at 7:45 a.m. on Jan. 12 near the upper parking lot of Glorietta Elementary School. Photo Paul Greenstone

And therein lies the irony: Killing a coyote, she says, actually prompts something in the pack's females to have more pups, "because there is more food available." So whether they are eating red squirrels or ground squirrels or rats or chickens or cats or little dogs, by eliminating an adult coyote from the pack, it is a yearlong Thanksgiving buffet for the local coyote populations until the reproductive cycle starts again.

"Coyotes are very, very resilient and adaptable animals," Marianchild said. "They adapt to urban areas quite easily."

Many times it is the people in areas like Lamorinda who are causing the influx. Coyotes are so much fun to see that people start to feed them and begin to leave out food at their homes, or when hikers or residents see coyotes along a park or trail, they might toss them a bit of sandwich.

"People who see coyotes want to get close," said Camilla Fox, probably the best local expert on coyotes moving into urban areas. She started Project Coyote in Marin County 20 years ago. She said what people don't recognize is that the coyote, which has been around since the Pleistocene Epoch, is a top predator in the area, keeping rats, squirrels and other small mammals in check. It's a healthy balance, she said.

"There is a whole variety of variables as to why people are seeing more coyotes," Fox said. "We are right now moving into breeding season so we might be seeing more movement." With breeding season starting, Fox said it is young adults - probably like the coyote seen at Glorietta Elementary - that are breaking out from the pack and branching out. "It's not possible to say whether it's a female or male," she said about the Glorietta photo, "but it's probably a young adult."

And coyotes do, indeed, get into trash when they are hungry. "If people don't secure their garbage, yes, coyotes and other animals will get into the bins," Fox said. But the presence of coyotes is a good thing, she said. They help control hanta virus and plague, and other illnesses that exist in the area, by eating rodent populations.

Tales have seemed abundant of late: A grandmother sees two coyotes near the trail where she is pushing her grandchild in a stroller, a father snaps a photo of another trotting near the gate of Glorietta Elementary School in Orinda, a big coyote is seen perched in the middle of the road in Canyon, prompting neighbors to email each other about keeping their cats inside.

Coyote sightings are everywhere throughout Lamorinda, but is it the time of year, or are there actually more coyotes around?

"Absolutely there are more coyotes," said Kate Marianchild, author of "Secrets of the Oak Woodlands: Plants and Animals Among California's Oaks," published by Heyday Books in 2014. "Coyote populations are on the increase because of the human predation on them."

Coyotes will also eat cat or dog food that is left out on porches or decks, or the dogs or cats themselves. "I had a neighbor who lost two cats to coyotes, right off his front porch," said Bill Swearingen of Burton Valley. "He ended up shooting it. You have to be careful about what kind of gun you use in an urban area." (The writer of this piece resisted using an exclamation point on that last sentence.) According to Marianchild, shooting a coyote only exacerbates the situation.

Marianchild and Fox both said that instead of luring coyotes in, it is best to keep the animals' instincts intact. "When you see one, wave your hands or a scarf and yell at them," Fox said. "That will keep them believing that you are a threat."

As far as the Moraga grandmother who wrote to this newspaper to report seeing two coyotes in Lafayette near the trail where she was pushing her 4-month-old granddaughter in a stroller, Fox said she probably has nothing to worry about.

"Of course there is reason for concern," Fox said. "Anybody would be concerned if they had a small child with them." But she postulates that any aggressive act from a canine in the field may be a hybrid of dog and coyote - the dog part wants to approach people and the coyote part wants to run away.

"Coyotes will be digging their dens soon," Fox said, so look forward to April. And don't toss those wild coyotes any sandwiches. Scare them, instead, and watch them run.

More about Kate Marianchild's wildlife essays can be found at www.katemarianchild.com. Information about Project Coyote can be found at www.projectcoyote.org.

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