

Learning to Live with Coyotes in Metropolitan Areas

Shannon E. Pederson, Graduate Student, Virginia Tech

David L. Trauger, Director of Natural Resources in Northern Virginia, Virginia Tech

James A. Parkhurst, Associate Professor and Extension Wildlife Specialist, Virginia Tech

Urban Coyotes

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are 35-to-40 pound doglike mammals that have entered metropolitan areas of Virginia. They have thrived in other large cities in the United States and have a very good chance for survival here. Being generalists, they eat plants, animals, and even garbage. However, their diet mainly includes rodents, other small mammals, fruits, and vegetables, all of which are available in metropolitan areas. Although coyotes may help reduce the numbers of other problematic animals, we must respect their wild nature while learning to co-exist with them.

The Threat

If coyotes lose their natural fear of people (due to people feeding them), they have the potential to pose a serious threat. Small children and adults have been attacked in other cities where coyotes are known to have been fed by people. In addition to human safety concerns, we need to consider pet safety as well. Outdoor cats and small dogs serve as potential prey, whereas larger dogs also may be attacked when viewed by coyotes as potential competitors. Coyotes may carry diseases, viruses, and parasites, some of which, such as rabies, may be fatal to humans.

The Solution

Prevention is the best policy! If everyone works together and follows these simple guidelines, we can manage the coyote population and minimize problems.

1. Keep your pets and their food and water indoors. Supervise your pets when they are outdoors.
2. Spay/neuter your dogs to prevent hybridization. Keep pets current on vaccinations.
3. Supervise young children when outdoors. Teach them that coyotes may be observed at a distance, but they should never approach them close enough to touch or feed them. Children should tell an adult if they see one.

4. Take your garbage can to the curb on the morning of your scheduled pickup and use a tightly secured container.
5. Clean up any spilled birdseed, fruits, or vegetables in patios or gardens. Use closed containers for compost rather than open piles.
6. If you are concerned about having coyotes in your yard, consider minimizing the amount of low ground cover that may harbor rodents and small mammals, their preferred prey. Also, examine and modify, if necessary, the spacing of other vegetation to reduce its attractiveness as a resting area for coyotes.
7. Treat any emerging rodent problem immediately and follow label directions on any commercially available control products accordingly.
8. If you choose to fence your yard, it is helpful to make it at least six feet tall, arched outward at the top, and buried one to two feet. Please be aware that few fences are completely coyote-proof.
9. Take extra precautions near any potential den sites during pup-rearing season (May-August); coyotes may become aggressive if they feel threatened.
10. Most importantly, DO NOT FEED COYOTES!

If You See a Coyote

Don't panic! Most coyotes will leave the area when they detect your presence. If, after seeing you, the coyote does not leave, then make a loud noise or, if at night, turn on any nearby lights. If a stubborn coyote still does not go away, throw rocks or sticks near it to make it flee. If the above techniques are unsuccessful, or if you are uncomfortable with the circumstances, please call your local animal control specialist and seek professional assistance in resolving the situation.