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THE URBAN COYOTE PROBLEM IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

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ABSTRACT: Extensive, urban development of hillside areas in Los Angeles County has created an undesirable human interface with coyotes (*Canis latrans*). Plentiful, readily available household garbage, pet foods, and water have spawned abnormal numbers of bold coyotes that have adopted residential properties and the human environment as ideal habitat. Consequently, at least six persons have been attacked, including the death of a three-year old child, during the past three years. Selective use of padded steel traps, shooting, and public education are presently being used in problem areas by the Agricultural Commissioner in an attempt to reindoctrinate these predators into returning to their natural habits.

INTRODUCTION

The glimpse of a coyote (*Canis latrans*) is no startling experience for many residents living in numerous Los Angeles County urban-suburban areas that have expanded into hillside areas. In fact, of late it is not unusual for persons traveling to work, joggers, newspaper deliverymen, or other early risers to observe one to six coyotes--often in the same areas and at approximately the same time daily.

Los Angeles County covers 4,000 square miles, containing 78 cities, of which 35 cities have coyotes. Affluent residential properties now extend into more than 100 lineal miles of mountain ranges spread out over many pockets of native brush and canyons where coyotes feel very comfortably at home, refusing to retreat as have most other predators.

Coyotes have discovered the human environment here to be ideal, providing them with abundant food choices such as readily available household garbage, pet foods, small pets, vegetable gardens, water, and vast assortments of other leftovers conveniently accessible day or night. Oftentimes food is intentionally provided by well-meaning persons who believe they are doing a good deed.

Significant research by Dixon (1925), McLean (1934), Bond (1939), Darby (1947), Hawthorne (1972), supports evidence that the wild coyote in California is an opportunistic feeder readily subsisting on the most easily obtainable food. It, therefore, appears reasonable that the city coyote has chosen and prefers this easy fare to that of the usual, sparse, natural diet of small rodents or rabbits often obtained only after a difficult chase and the expenditure of considerable energy.

He has adapted and flourished so well over other predators that he has been termed a modern success story. This success, however, has created an undesirable human interface within many city areas. For at least the past twelve years, homeowners have reported incidents such as: Coyotes staring through the front windows with their large yellow eyes glaring at their poodle or house cat; a big mangy coyote routinely sleeping in the morning upon a chaise lounge on the back porch; a coyote chasing a small dog through the doggy door into and around the kitchen; a coyote tight-rope walking a fence rail; a coyote snatching a dog off the leash; a mother coyote growling at children playing in their back yard (a den containing two pups being hidden beneath a shed); a coyote carrying a freshly killed house cat down the street; a coyote feeding upon a poodle in the street within full view of passing motorists; coyotes with active dens on the Caltrans freeway raiding nearby properties.

These and many other such similar incidents were noted over the years by not only the Agricultural Commissioner, but also numerous other animal control agencies. Public awareness and recognition of the magnitude of the urban coyote problem had its beginning with the first aggressive coyote behavior noted towards humans when the Glendale City Police reported in 1975 that a lost two-year old boy was found surrounded by a pack of coyotes (personal communications 1981). In the following six years at least six additional human attacks were recorded, mostly small children; and the more recent and most serious attack resulted in the tragic death of a three-year old Glendale girl (Table 1).

This rare incident prompted immediate public and governmental realization that, although it occurred in an urban area, protection from attacks by wild animals is appropriate and should be provided.

PLAN OF ACTION

The County Board of Supervisors authorized the Agricultural Commissioner to contract with the City of Glendale to selectively trap and remove coyotes from areas where harassment or damage was in progress. The Commissioner was fully capable of this response since he has long had a program of trapping predatory animals for the protection of agricultural areas and as a contract service to cities.

In addition to direct control of coyotes, the Commissioner was also directed to implement an educational program for the public on how to cope with the city coyote and to assist other city animal control agencies within the County in predatory animal control techniques. In November 1981 an ordinance was passed which prohibited the feeding of predatory animals and rodents in the

Table 1. Reported coyote attacks on humans in urban Los Angeles County since 1975.

Date	City	Attack Details	Information Source
2/6/75	Glendale	Lost two-year old boy found surrounded by pack of coyotes - rescued by Glendale Police.	1
5/78	Pasadena	Karina Grotz, age 5, female. Bitten on left leg by coyote while in driveway of home.	2
5/79	Pasadena	Kory Willis, age 2, female. Attacked by coyote while eating cookies on front porch - grabbed by throat and cheek.	2
6/79	Pasadena	Floyd Mattix, age 67, male. Coyote bit heel while picking up newspaper from front yard.	2
7/79	Pasadena	Laura Reinsch, age 17, female. Leg tore by coyotes while attempting to save dog that was being attacked.	2
7/79	Pasadena	Bob Dietrich, male. Jogger - coyote bit legs - Dietrich climbed tree to escape.	3
8/79	LaVerne	Montsho Downing, age 5, female. Coyote grabbed and attempted to drag her into bushes. Deep bites on neck, head, and legs - saved by father.	3
7/80	Agoura	Lindsey Raser, age 13 months, female. Grabbed and dragged off by coyote - puncture wounds to midsection - saved by mother.	3
8/81	Glendale	Kelly Keen, age 3, female. Killed by coyote in front yard - neck broken - massive bleeding.	4

1/ Glendale Police Department.

2/ Pasadena Department of Human Services Animal Bite Reports.

3/ News Media

4/ Los Angeles County Chief Medical Examiner - Coroner.

unincorporated areas of Los Angeles County. The cities of Burbank, Glendale, Pasadena, South Pasadena, and Claremont had already passed such ordinances. As a final long-range plan to help protect the public from future attacks or damage from coyotes, the Commissioner was authorized to extend direct suppression into unincorporated areas of the County.

Because of the gravity of the reported human death from a coyote attack and the presence of abnormal numbers of coyotes noted within the City of Glendale, concerted efforts were devoted by the Agricultural Commissioner, the Glendale Humane Society, and the Glendale Police Department to alleviate the situation. The results of this work are summarized in this paper (Tables 2 and 3). Much of the information pertaining to the urban coyote behavior is from personal observations and experiences gathered during my more than 17 years of residence in the Glendale Verdugo Mountains, from other residents, and from County trapper field notes.

The Glendale-Agricultural Commissioner program first started in September, 1981, to reduce the unnatural numbers of coyotes observed ranging within an approximately 500-acre square and within a one-half mile radius of the Keen residence in the Chevy Chase Canyon area of the San Rafael Mountains. Standard steel traps with offset jaws wrapped with burlap padding placed in dual, blind (trail) sets were employed. The data were collected over a three-month period; traps were monitored for a total of 80 trap days. Due to the boldness of many coyotes, small calibre rifles were also effectively used for direct suppression. Each trap location was checked daily and all trapped coyotes dispatched by shooting. Many of the carcasses were transported to the Los Angeles County Veterinarian for necropsy analysis and rabies tests. In addition, Nobuto filter-strip blood samples were taken from each animal and submitted to the State of California Department of Health Services, Vector Biology and Control Section, for bubonic plague antibody detection.

Table 2. Summary of coyotes (*Canis latrans*), taken from selected control areas within the City of Glendale, September 1981 - January 1982. Data from L.A. County Agricultural Commissioner field records and Glendale Humane Society.

Month	Shot	Trapped	Other ^{1/}
September	24	7	2
October	2	11	1
November ^{2/}	5	2	
December	2	6	
January	3	5	
TOTALS:	36	31	3

^{1/} Found dead - cause unknown.

^{2/} End of Keen area program - November 20, 1981 - 55 coyotes removed.

Table 3. Summary of trapping program within City of Glendale, September 1, 1981 - January 31, 1982.

Month	Trap days	Average no. traps set per day	No. of locations
September	30	14	4
October	31	26	5
November	19 ^{1/}	19	8
December	14	22	4
January	9	25	4
TOTAL	103		

^{1/} End of Keen area program - 80 trap days.

RESULTS

During the 80-day program conducted within a one-half mile radius of the Keen residence, a total of 55 coyotes were taken. A daily average of 20 traps and 5 private property locations were monitored each day. No dogs or other nontarget species were trapped. No free-running dogs were observed at any time within the entire area.

DISCUSSION

Judging by the excessive numbers of coyotes (possibly ten times normal) taken from the Keen area, it seems apparent that we have a living model which dramatically demonstrates the coyote to be truly one of nature's most ingenious and adaptable predators, especially when he is virtually unopposed and supplied with a substantial food base.

It is hoped that the Commissioner's program--employing selective removal of aggressive coyotes in problem areas, educating homeowners to eliminate readily available food sources by improved household garbage containment, removing of outdoor pet foods and water, practicing rodent control, and discontinuing the feeding of wild animals by well-meaning residents--will reindoctrinate this incredible animal to return to his natural role.

To be able to observe the coyote at a respectful distance and to hear its howl will not be lost to those who enjoy the native fauna.

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