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The Urban Coyote: Another Approach to the Problem

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ABSTRACT: From the perspective of a private wildlife control operator, I share experiences and advice in dealing with problem urban coyotes, including strategies to deal with municipalities, the public, and the media. New technologies, such as geographic mapping programs, help identify habitats where problem coyotes are likely sheltering during daytime, and where capture equipment can be installed. Remote cameras are invaluable in surveillance of potential trap sites for non-target animals, and in monitoring traps sets so captured animals can be removed quickly. Necropsies should be done to evaluate the health of problem coyotes taken. Intentional feeding may cause coyotes to become aggressive toward pets and people, even in autumn when coyotes are typically less territorial. I discuss why I do not typically encourage residents to conduct hazing on urban coyotes, and why relocation of problem coyotes is not advisable and is often illegal. Professionals who conduct urban coyote control have an opportunity to help educate the public about scientifically-based wildlife management, and how to deal with problem coyotes. Web sites, news releases, and public service announcements can all be useful educational tools.

KEY WORDS: cameras, *Canis latrans*, control strategies, coyote, firearms, habituation, municipalities, predator control, public relations, snares, traps, urban coyotes

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The coyote (*Canis latrans*) has substantially expanded its geographical range throughout North America within the past several decades, while at the same time coyote populations have increased in many areas. As a highly adaptable and opportunistic animal, the coyote has increasingly become established in urban and suburban areas, where conflicts with people and pets have occurred with increasing frequency (Alexander and Quinn 2008, Gehrt 2006, Timm and Baker 2007).

As a result, private wildlife control operators are called upon to solve conflicts caused by coyotes in cities and municipalities, both on public and privately-owned properties. I offer some recommendation for dealing with urban coyote problems, from my own experiences and perspectives.

Within any community, there will be residents who support coyote control efforts, as well as those who oppose them. When a village or municipality is experiencing coyote problems, it is very common to see residents walking their dogs armed with pitchforks, baseball bats, and golf clubs. Recently, I saw a resident carrying a sledgehammer.

Determining Problem Scope

Once public officials have decided that a coyote removal program should be instituted, a number of decisions need to be made. We must decide on whether to target only the diseased and aggressive animals, or to utilize a population reduction plan. If coyote conflicts within the area have been documented, this information can be useful in deciding where and how to capture animals.

When incidents have been documented, they need to be mapped. I have found it very useful to use the Google[™] Earth free program (<http://earth.google.com/>). Each coyote incident can be plotted by location within the municipality. By using the 'zoom out' tool, you can view the wider terrain, giving an aerial view of the various

surrounding habitats. At this point, terrain that could hold coyotes during the daytime hours should be examined. Areas of interest include golf courses, landfills, jogging paths and parks, utility easements, and forest preserves. If problem coyotes are described as having mange, special attention should be given to any compost piles in the area. In urban environments, coyote home ranges can be as small as ½ square mile. Once this information is evaluated, permission will need to be secured to access the areas that are likely holding the coyotes.

When you have an agreement in place with a municipality, you can have the town or village create a daily coyote sightings log. This log should record times and dates of coyote sightings or incidents, and directions of coyote movement to/from the site. You can create a database for each municipality using your services. Through time, these historical observations will help you, in a future year, more efficiently relocate den sites, travel ways, and so forth.

Business Considerations and Agreements

The importance of offering a comprehensive coyote control plan to municipalities is that if done correctly, aggressive and diseased animals can be removed before a larger problem develops. My criteria is to institute a coyote control program only after a domestic animal has been attacked or killed, or when there is a den site within an area frequented by children, such as a park, school, or playground.

If a village attempts to limit my options for removal, I will turn down the job. My work is hard enough without taking my tools away. There have been times when they might say it is permissible to trap but not shoot, or to shoot but not trap. This is not acceptable to me. The coyotes have a way of humbling me with the tools I have now, and they certainly don't need any help. This is not a sport, it is a job, and I need to achieve my goals in the most efficient and cost-effective manner possible. If one

village is allowed to limit your tools, others will try. As one might imagine, communication networks between villages are close.

Another note: Do not sign a contract with the village. I did this one time, and I will never do it again. A contract is written information that can be accessed by animal rights groups through the Freedom of Information Act. (On one job, there were over 150 requests for that information from across the country, and the village received slanderous attacks on me from individuals in a distant state.)

One village wanted me to get written permission slips from every homeowner letting me use their property to set traps. This information can also be accessed by animal rights groups, and can then be used to threaten and harass the residents who are cooperating with the project. Their safety could and would be in jeopardy. (This has happened across the country, in other nuisance wildlife control situations.) If the village insists, walk away. Believe me, it is not worth the liability.

You will need to be the sole media spokesman. Try not to let the village officials handle media questions. (They are not experts, and are apt to give misinformation; they run villages, you handle wildlife.)

Planning the Control Strategy

Areas of habitat where coyotes are likely sheltering during daytime should be physically inspected. Look for droppings and tracks. If domestic dog food is found in coyote droppings, suspect that someone in the neighborhood is feeding coyotes, and inform the municipal officials. Inspect the area for signs of non-target animals (e.g., skunks, raccoons, opossums, cats, dogs off leash). Determine if there is a family unit of coyotes or just a pair, or a solitary animal.

Site Reconnaissance

When you decide on a location showing coyote activity where you may wish to set capture devices, conduct at least 20 hours of surveillance at this site before installing traps or snares. Give special attention to residents walking dogs in the early morning and late evening hours. All pets that are off leashes need to be reported to the police (or animal control authority). No traps or snares can be set if these problems are not resolved. Whatever the approach, the use of infra-red / motion-sensitive trail cameras for pre-scouting potential capture sites should take place for at least 2 weeks prior to starting the capture program.

The use of the SmartScouter™ camera (ERS Group Inc., Atlanta, GA; <https://www.smartscouters.com>) has changed the way I trap. This device sends a photo to my cell phone and computer within 1 minute of any activity at the trap site (Figure 1). I can't overemphasize how this tool has made my job more effective and safer when it comes to avoiding non-target animals.

Before I set any traps, either footholds or snares, I create dummy sets. One is a common dirt hole, with coyote glands and urine as attractors. Nearby, I also create another dirt hole, with fish-based bait in the hole. I set the camera up to monitor these sets. If there is a non-target in the area, I will have a picture of that particular



Figure 1. Example of photographic image transmitted during reconnaissance of a potential trap location, via use of SmartScouter™ camera equipment.



Figure 2. Video reconnaissance of a potential trap set site can identify non-target animals using the site, enabling them to be dealt with prior to initiating coyote capture efforts.

animal within the first week. At this point I forward all of the photos of concern to the village officials and homeowners working with me on the project; this could include the animal control officer, the mayor, and the police chief. The urine set will attract any stray dogs in the area, and the fish-based set will attract any stray felines (Figure 2). I will not set a trap until any strays have been found, and the owner of any roaming dog has been informed that the animal needs to be controlled. These roaming dogs are almost always in violation of existing leash laws. The problems of roaming or stray animals are dealt with by the village, not by me. Most often, the homeowners know the origin of an animal. Once this has been done, and the camera has not picked up any more non-target animals for at least a week, the traps can be set.

The SmartScouter™ has both infra-red and motion detection capabilities that trigger the unit to take a photo, which is then automatically sent to the user's cell phone or computer. When installing the camera, I try to position it in an out-of-sight location about 10 yards away from the set. I place 2 traps at each set, with the camera positioned so as to see both traps. I use the camera's

most sensitive setting, which will often trigger pictures when a bird flies by or a large leaf floats in front of the sensor. I find this comforting, as receiving a few pictures during the day assures me that my sets are ok. In working with the manufacturer, we have been able to have the camera take a picture every hour, if we so choose. The new models are also equipped with a 'burst' mode that takes up to 5 pictures per trigger.

Traps and Snares

The proper use of tools in the urban area is critical to any removal program. The use of foothold traps in an urban area can be a very tricky situation, as weather can play a huge factor in trapping success. The traps that I have had good success with are the Jake Trap™ (J. C. Connors Ltd., Newcomerstown, OH) with rubber jaws, and the MB-650 (Minnesota Trapline Products Inc., Pennock, MN) with the jaws laminated for extra thickness, both inside and out. These traps capture the animals without injury. The most common set used in conjunction with foothold is the naked dirt hole set. It is particularly effective when large numbers of non-target animals are present.

When snaring, I use the Reichart neck snare (Alert A.D.C. LLC, Bourbon, IN). These are set so there is no chance of entanglement, which guarantees that the captured animal is held without injury. This lock has been instrumental in making snares legal in at least 3 states to date.

I can't overemphasize the importance of constant trap checks. When traps are set in high-profile areas, I will often stay in the village all night to make sure an accidental catch does not occur. The SmartScouter™ camera can be set to take a picture every hour on the hour, or however often you choose. The camera will check in automatically every 24 hours, in case you need to change the settings. If for any reason the camera does not check in, I drive to it to make sure everything is working properly. There are times when the system is busy, just like your cell phone, but the camera keeps on sending until it gets through.

There are other devices that alert you when a trap has been set off, but the picture tells you so much more. The advantages are too numerous to describe here. However, a few are as follows: You can tell if your catch is a secure upper paw hold, or just a toe. By knowing there is an animal in the trap, you can alert the local authorities to dispatch an officer to make sure no one approaches the animal while you are in transit to take care of it. The animal is in the trap for the least amount of time possible, reducing both stress and the chances of escape. You can identify certain animals, such as those with noticeable mange. This can make a huge difference if you are trying to target just sick animals.

I am sure there will be smaller and better devices than the SmartScouter™ in the future (and when there are, I will embrace that technology), but for now, this is cutting edge for an urban coyote trapper.

Shooting

Shooting can be a problem inside city limits. In most cases, I am deputized by the municipality to use a gun for

the duration of the project. If shooting is an option make sure the use of firearms is acceptable in your situation.

The use of specialized ammunition is critical when in close proximity to dwellings. The two I most often use are the .22 rimfire Aguila® 60-grain SSS Sniper SubSonic load (Centurion Ordnance Inc., Helotes, TX), and the 12-gauge Metro Gun (Metro Gun Systems™, Piedmont, SD) loaded with #3 tungsten shot. Both are extremely safe in the urban environment because of their low velocity and short range. They also have a very low report, and cause little or no disturbance. The coyote's head and neck area are targeted with the Metro Gun, and the lung area is targeted with the .22 Aguila® load. I keep my shots within 30 yards. From February to September, the use of a decoy dog and calling works very well, as the mated coyote pair is sure to protect their denning site from any intruding canines.

Health and Behavior of Problem Coyotes

My goal during the capture process is to eliminate the alpha pair. Once this is done, I like to wait a week to see if the attacks continue. More often than not, once the alpha pair has been removed, the problems cease. However, if the attacks continue, the removal of the whole pack will be necessary, especially when animals with mange are present.

After animals have been captured, it is important to log all the biological information possible. Examination of the uterus of captured adult females for scars will give you an idea of the number of pups produced, which can be an indicator of pack health. Many of the animals I trap in urban areas appear to be healthy, but necropsies have revealed that they were sick, often suffering from severe heartworm and numerous other parasites. I have a necropsy done on *every* coyote I capture. Many research personnel do not utilize a necropsy, but I believe this is a serious mistake when dealing with urban coyotes. I need all the facts to put the puzzle together. The issue of whether the animal's health is compromised should be taken very seriously. Also, the non-trapping public will have a difficult time objecting to the removal of sick animals.

There are times when we capture coyotes, which have attacked dogs or other domestic animals, and these coyotes show no signs of disease. This is especially true during the months of January and February, the coyotes' breeding season. At that time, most often the motivation for these attacks is territorial.

When attacks occur during the months of September to December, we take a very close look at the health of the coyote. Most of the territorial urges have subsided in these months, and the pups have dispersed or are dispersing. In many cases, a human-fed or human-habituated coyote can be the reason for attacks during this period. Yet, most, if not all, residents will assure you that nobody is feeding the coyotes. It is important to note that by the time I have been contacted to resolve the problem, the animals have been habituated for months, if not years.

Many times, habituated animals are in very poor health, a result of their increased dependency on humans and domestic food sources. People who intentionally feed coyotes believe they are helping the animals survive.

Feeding, however, is irresponsible behavior. The enforcement of wildlife feeding laws is very difficult, and even when a feeder is caught, the fine is normally less money than the feeder is spending on the food. So, they pay the fine and continue feeding the coyotes. This continues to be a difficult challenge for communities experiencing coyote problems. Recently, when being interviewed by the media, I called on the village of Wheaton, IL to institute a \$10,000 fine for feeding coyotes. This money would go into an account to pay the trapper when a problem arises. The fact that the feeder's money would be used to pay for killing the coyotes would hopefully be an incentive to get them to reconsider their feeding. Subsequently, Wheaton instituted a wildlife feeding ordinance with a fine of \$960. That's not as high as I would have hoped, but the fine escalates for repeat offenders, so it is a start.

Hazing

State wildlife agencies, municipalities, and animal welfare organizations often advise people to make efforts to re-instill fear of humans into urban coyotes by acting aggressively and using hazing or scaring techniques against coyotes in residential environments. Although this has some merit, many other factors need to be taken into consideration. The practice of teaching people, especially children, to confront coyotes by making themselves look big, stomping their feet, yelling or throwing stones at the animals to scare them away, etc., is in my opinion an accident waiting to happen. Approaching or confronting a habituated coyote could trigger an incident that endangers a child, or even an adult. Some coyote attacks on children are clearly predatory in nature (Carbyn 1989), as children fit the coyote prey size profile. In October 2009, 19-year-old woman was attacked and killed by human-habituated coyotes in a national park in Nova Scotia, in what appears to be a predatory attack (Wilkinson 2009).

I do not encourage close contact with urban coyotes. Actions of aggression towards a sick animal could force the animal into a situation that it is unable to escape from, and it may attack. The bottom line is that we cannot take action based merely on the appearance of the animal. However, if residents are going to try to use hazing or other negative stimuli to scare off coyotes, this should be conducted by adults, and only from a safe distance.

Another issue is that many residents who have already had an aggressive episode with a coyote, are *not* willing to confront the animals again. Most of my clients are terrified of the coyotes, and some will even leave their homes until the aggressive animals are captured. As a private wildlife control operator, I cannot expect the client to solve the problem by scaring it off.

Coyote Relocation

Some animal welfare proponents oppose lethal control of coyotes, and therefore they encourage the notion in the public's mind that problem urban coyotes, if captured, should simply be relocated outside the municipality. It has also been suggested by some that any animals with mange be taken to a wildlife rehabilitator, and then released back into the wild after being treated. I have

serious reservations regarding this idea. Most of the animals I have been dealing with have already figured out that humans are associated with food. Remember, while being treated, humans are again feeding the animal, which further reinforces habituation. If a rehabber can guarantee that the animal will not revert to bad behavior, and can be held responsible for that guarantee to the village where the animal is being released, I could possibly agree.

During a pilot study involving some Chicago-area problem coyotes that a village wanted to relocate, 100% of the animals that were relocated from urban environments to semi-rural areas were killed within 90 days. When the animals were found, their body weight was up to 30% less than when originally captured. Many showed signs of puncture wounds and facial scars that were not present after the previous capture. Further studies on relocating coyotes may be warranted. However, in most other mammal species, attempts at relocation have not been successful, and evidence suggests it doesn't work for coyotes, either. Further, most state wildlife agencies have regulations and policies that prohibit relocation of problem animals.

Public Relations and Educating the Public

It is very important to institute a public education campaign. As urban coyote conflicts increase, the wildlife control operator has a golden opportunity to educate the non-trapping public. I spend an enormous amount of time with village residents, and with the media, to accomplish this. Instruct the village to develop educational material that describes what residents can do to minimize human-animal conflicts. During the control program, you can create a web page to keep the media and residents updated on the progress of the project. This will save hours on the telephone.

Animal rights activists will give their views, which are based on emotion, so it is very important to base your views on scientific fact. The media can be important in getting the 'no feeding message' out to the public. Remember; explain that 'a fed coyote is a dead coyote'. Challenge the media to look closely at both sides of the issue. Remind reporters to make sure the other side gives *factual* statements to back up their emotional views. State information that is based on scientific wildlife management, not opinion. Distribute handouts of completed study results, enabling the media to back up your facts.

Local cable channels and newsletters have worked well. I have recently created Public Service Announcement (PSA) videos to help educate the residents. This seems to have been a big help for those villages that run them on their cable access channels. In my case, the PSA is run 24 hours a day during the coyote-breeding season.

The urban coyote is here to stay, and the public needs to understand this. With a common sense approach, and proper tools and techniques, coyotes can be managed even in the most densely populated areas.

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