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LIVING

Kawartha coyotes

"If all the creatures in the world were to die, the coyote would be the last one left." This is how one Native American legend describes the supreme ability to survive of *canis latrans*, better known as the coyote. This amazingly adaptable canine is common in the Kawarthas, although much of the



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

time its presence goes undetected. This past year, however, I have received a large number of reports from people who have either heard or seen coyotes. In fact, quite a few have been seen right in Peterborough. Two recent sightings include animals observed crossing High Street and Armour Road, and another that was seen hanging around the grounds of the Peterborough Centennial Museum in the middle of the day.

Coyotes did not appear in Ontario until about 1900. By then, farming and logging had transformed the landscape, creating a patchwork of fields and woodlots ideal for these open-country animals. Their arrival in our part of the province only goes back to the mid-1950s. The coyote is originally a native of the prairies of western North America. However, biologists now distinguish between the eastern coyote, a larger, more wolf-like animal, and the western coyote, a smaller canid of the prairies and British Columbia.

And what beautiful animals they are. The eastern race of the species is about the size of a small, lean German shepherd dog. They are grizzled grey with a whitish throat and belly and rusty ears and legs. The tail is long and bushy and hangs straight down. Coyotes generally have both a pointed muzzle and pointed ears, while the wolf's nose, ears and head present a boxier look. In addition, coyotes keep their tail down while running. Wolves tend to hold theirs straight out. On average, eastern coyotes weigh about 35 pounds, nine pounds more than western coyotes. The reason for their larger size in eastern Canada stems from their close relationship to wolves.

Through genetic analysis done by Brad White and Paul Wilson of Trent University, it has now been established that the wolves of central Ontario, including Algonquin Park, are not simply a small race of the timber wolf, as previously believed. Rather, they are a totally separate species, almost identical to the red wolf of the southern U.S. They have therefore been given their own name, that of eastern wolf (*canis lycaon*). Coyotes are closely related to the eastern wolf; consequently, the two species sometimes hybridize, a male wolf mating with a female coyote. The presence of wolf genes explains why eastern coyotes are bigger and darker than their western cousins. In fact, all wolf and coyote-like animals in Peterborough County contain, to varying degrees, both coyote and eastern wolf genetic material. Depending on the habitat, one or the other is dominant. In open, agricultural areas, the animals contain more coyote genes. In forested, northern areas, wolf genes are more dominant and the animals are slightly larger and heavier. Even the wolves of Algonquin Park show some evidence of prior hybridization with coyotes.

Although most people only see coyotes on rare occasions, hearing them is quite common. Coyotes can bark, squeal, growl and wail, but what we hear most often is a series of high-pitched yips and howls. Dawn and dusk tend to be the peak calling times; however, the animals can be heard at other times of the day and night as well. When a coyote begins to call, a second animal often joins in. When the two sing in unison it can create the illusion of a dozen or more. The



An eastern coyote. Note the pointed ears and nose, and generally scrawny look.

Gordon Harrison, special to The Examiner

howling and yipping tends to start very suddenly but usually last for only 30 seconds to two minutes. It then stops as abruptly as it started. Why coyotes are so vocal is a bit of a mystery. It may have something to do with territorial claims, a cry for a mate. Or is it just an expression of joy or sociability?

Coyotes are vocal all year round, but we tend to hear them most in the spring and summer, probably because our windows are open. August through mid-October is actually the peak calling time. In the fall, the pups are well into their adolescence and seem to enjoy experimenting with their new-found voices. Late January to March is the mating season, and also a time when coyotes are often heard.

For anyone wanting to go out and listen for coyotes, I would suggest driving through some of the marginal agricultural land east of Peterborough or around the Cavan Swamp on a still night or early morning. Stop from time to time and listen. If all is quiet, try howling yourself. By creating a high-pitched, mid-volume imitation of the classic coyote howl (yip-yip-yerrrr), you may very well elicit a response. The coyotes may respond almost immediately, several minutes later, or not at all. Try not to sound too menacing, however. Coyotes are afraid of wolves.

In recent weeks, I have had reports of coyotes calling around Lily Lake, the Warsaw Caves, Valleyview Drive near Jackson Creek, Daleview Drive in Donwood, County Road 2 west of Keene, Campbelltown Road, Johnston Drive south of the Bypass and along the Seventh Line of Smith-Ennismore-Lakefield near the Otonabee River.

In addition to hearing the animals, you may also come across their scat and tracks. Coyote scat is usually found in the middle of trails or on some raised object. Unlike dog scat, which smells to high heaven, coyote scat has almost no odour. Winter scat is easiest to identify because, as with all wild canines, it contains mostly hair. To avoid confusion with fox scat, however, you need to look at the size. Any scat close to one inch in diameter and containing large bone fragments is undoubtedly that of coyote. Scat is

easy to find along the rail trail between Jackson Park and Lily Lake and on the rail and nature trails at Trent University. Coyotes routinely use man-made paths, ski trails, snowmobile trails and roads.

As far as seeing them is concerned, try going out in the early morning and checking hay fields. Fields that have just been cut seem to be particularly popular, probably because the meadow voles have fewer places to hide. Coyotes can also be seen crossing lakes in winter. Sightings on Stoney Lake seem to be fairly common. Residents also report finding deer and hare kills on the ice on occasion.

Coyotes are opportunistic feeders. In other words, they will eat almost anything from "grass to grasshoppers and deer mice to deer" as author Paul Rezendes describes it. From spring through fall, their diet consists of small rodents such as chipmunks, mice and voles, but also larger animals like raccoons, foxes and white-tailed deer fawns. In late summer, however, fruit and insects can make up nearly half of what they eat. With the arrival of winter, their diet changes somewhat to include hares, rabbits, porcupines and carrion. They will also take deer weakened by hunger and disease. At all times of the year, coyotes will also take advantage of food opportunities created by humans such as garbage, small pets, sheep, calves and poultry. Some local farmers have responded to this threat by putting a donkey in the field with their livestock. Donkeys have a natural dislike for canines and will immediately make this known to any coyotes that come visiting.

A friend who lives on the southern edge of Peterborough has been entertained on at least four occasions recently by a coyote coming to his yard for apples. Cautiously approaching from a nearby hayfield, the coyote would grab an apple and then beat a hasty retreat to the cover of long grass. On one occasion, when the only apples left were still hanging from the branches, it spent a good while simply staring upwards in frustration, wondering what to do next.

Coyotes are hunted extensively in Ontario. In Peterborough County, they can

be hunted all year around, and there is no bag limit. The hunting sometimes involves using dogs with radio collars. Although some hunting may be necessary in cases of livestock predation, it is never successful as a long-term solution to the predation problem. Hunting can even backfire because it can lead to the creation of smaller coyote packs. The animals respond by having much larger than usual litter sizes.

Coyotes also play an important role in the ecosystem. By killing foxes and raccoons, for example, they indirectly benefit songbirds and turtles whose eggs are often preyed upon by these species. And, by taking deer, coyotes help the many other species that suffer from habitat degradation caused by exploding deer numbers.

As with all wild cats and canids, coyotes possess an undeniable mystique. Hearing or seeing them, one cannot help but feel moved by the aura of wildness that they convey — a quality that is quickly disappearing from the natural world.

What to watch for this week

As of Nov. 5, at least five great gray owls have been seen at locations near Orillia, where they were observed last winter. This time last year, only one great gray had been seen in central Ontario. Although it's too early to tell for sure, it would appear that we may be looking at another large great gray owl flight this winter. These reports come from a well-known Ontario naturalist, Bob Bowles. He also reports that last winter there were 85 owls killed by collisions with vehicles just in Simcoe County. As Bob says, for the sake of the owls, let's hope they stay home in northern Ontario this winter.

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