10 FASCINATING FACTS ABOUT URBAN COYOTES
Urban coyotes are present in practically every city across the United States. For many cities, the appearance of coyotes has happened only within the last few decades, and residents are still trying to get used to their new neighbors. Though there is a rise in awareness that coyotes are around, there is still a great deal of misunderstanding among city residents about coyote behavior and their role in urban ecology.

Here are ten facts about urban coyotes that will clear up common misconceptions and shed more light on this adaptable canid.
While many urban coyotes make their homes in large parks or forest preserves, this isn’t the case in all situations. Urban coyotes don’t need one cohesive piece of green space like a single park or a single golf course to call home. They manage to make do with surprisingly small patches of hunt-able land woven together as a whole territory.

Coyotes can thrive in a small territory if there is enough food and shelter, but if there isn’t — such as in sections of a city with only a handful of small parks, soccer fields, green spaces and the like — then they will expand the size of their territory to include enough places to hunt for food to sustain themselves. The size of an urban coyote’s range is dependent on the abundance of food and can be anywhere from two square miles to ten square miles or more. Urban coyotes tend to have smaller territory sizes than rural coyotes because there is so much more food packed into smaller areas, even if that area has only a few scattered parks.

Studies have shown that coyotes much prefer forested areas and large parks where they can steer clear of humans, and they try to avoid residential areas. But when that’s not available, they still figure out how to make due. In a large-scale study of urban coyotes by the Urban Coyote Research Program, it was discovered that “29 percent of collared coyotes have home ranges composed of less than 10 percent of natural land and 8 percent having no measurable patches of natural land within their home ranges.”

There is still a lot to learn about how coyotes use urban landscapes, which inevitably varies depending on the building density of different cities, the quality of green spaces, and many other factors. But one thing is for sure: the more researchers learn about urban coyote territories, the more it becomes apparent that coyotes make use of the most surprising places, even those that at first glance seem like an ecological desert.

01. Urban coyotes can create territories out of a patchwork of parks and green spaces
Though coyotes may be denning in the middle of an urban park, in old storm drains or even under sheds, it is still not likely you’ll stumble upon one while strolling down the street or hiking through a preserve. Coyotes do their best to hide their dens and will often have multiple dens and multiple entrances to a den to help conceal their activity. These dens are usually tucked away in shrubbery or the wooded patches of parks, washes, culverts, golf courses, preserves and similar spaces.

Coyotes avoid residential and commercial areas when they can, and instead seek out whatever remaining fragments of natural habitat are available, which usually is well away from the eyes of humans. Though this is where they prefer to be, they’ll use what they can get. Eastern Coyote Research notes that urban dens have been found “in culverts under heavily trafficked roads, basements of abandoned houses, and directly behind a drive-in movie screen” and according to National Geographic, “one GPS-collared coyote named 748 and his mate even raised a litter of five healthy pups inside a secret concrete den in the parking lot of Soldier Field Stadium, home of the Chicago Bears.”

However because coyote parents want to keep their pups protected and hidden from threats, once humans disturb a den the coyote likely will move pups to a new location. So even if you find a den one day, the family may not be there the next.
Urban coyotes may live in family packs or on their own at different points in their lives.

It’s common to see a single coyote hunting or traveling on its own, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it is alone. Coyotes are highly social animals and this didn’t change when they entered the urban ecosystem. Coyotes may live as part of a pack, which usually consists of an alpha male and female, perhaps one or two of their offspring from previous seasons (known as a “helper”) and their current litter of pups. The pack may also welcome in a solitary traveler if their territory can support another member. Packs living in sizable protected areas can have as many as five or six adults in addition to that season’s pups.

However, a coyote may also spend part of its life on its own, known as a solitary coyote. This is common when young coyotes disperse from their pack and go in search of their own territory, a new pack to join, or a mate with whom to start their own pack. A coyote may also spend a stretch of time as a loner if it was an alpha in a pack but lost its mate. According to Urban Coyote Research Program, between a third and half of coyotes under study are solitary coyotes, and they are usually youngsters between six months and two years old.

Because coyotes hunt and travel alone or in pairs, it is often thought that they don’t form packs. The study of urban coyotes has helped to correct this misconception and has revealed much about the social lives of coyotes.
Urban coyotes mate for life and are monogamous.

Speaking of mates, coyotes mate for life and are 100 percent faithful to that mate. A 2012 study published in the Journal of Mammalogy found that “among 18 litters comprising 96 offspring, [researchers] found no evidence of polygamy, and detected a single instance of a double litter (pups from different parents sharing the same den).”

“I was surprised we didn't find any cheating going on,” study co-author Stan Gehrt, told Science Daily in an article. “Even with all the opportunities for the coyotes to philander, they really don’t. In contrast to studies of other presumably monogamous species that were later found to be cheating, such as arctic foxes and mountain bluebirds, we found incredible loyalty to partners in the study population.”

This loyalty holds even when there are other coyotes in adjacent territories and plenty of opportunity for cheating. But coyote pairs stay faithful and faithful for life. Some of the pairs followed by the research team were together for as long as 10 years, only moving on when one mate died.

The researchers believe that this monogamy plays an important role in the success of urban coyotes. Because a female can adjust her litter size based on the availability of food and other factors, she can have larger litters of pups in a city where there is a buffet of rodents, reptiles, fruits, vegetables and so much else in a relatively small area. She also has a dedicated mate to help her feed and raise the pups, so these large litters have a higher survival rate, resulting in more coyotes reaching an age to disperse to other areas of a city.

Even when food is less abundant or there is territory pressure from other coyotes, the couple stays together year after year. Coyotes may be opportunistic about matters of food and shelter, but not when it comes to love.
Due to sensationalistic reporting, many urban residents think all coyotes are out to eat their dog or cat at the first opportunity, or that they’re dumpster divers of the first degree. On the contrary, studies have shown that urban coyotes stick mainly to a natural diet. Coyotes are opportunistic omnivores and will eat fruits and vegetables along with animal prey. A study by Urban Coyote Research Program analyzed over 1,400 scats and found that “the most common food items were small rodents (42%), fruit (23%), deer (22%), and rabbit (18%).” Only about 2 percent of the scats had human garbage and just 1.3 percent showed evidence of cats. “Apparently, the majority of coyotes in our study area do not, in fact, rely on pets or garbage for their diets,” say the researchers.

This aligns logically with urban coyotes’ preference of sticking to parks, preserves, cemeteries, and other out-of-the-way areas as much as possible. The food available in these locations is rodents, reptiles, fallen fruit and other food items that are part of a natural diet.

Coyotes of course take feral cats or the occasional domestic cat that has been left outdoors, and there is certainly evidence that coyotes that have become habituated and overly bold will go after small dogs. However pets are not primary prey for them, not by a long shot.

As it is with the presence of apex predators in any ecosystem, having coyotes living and thriving in an urban area is a positive sign of the health and biodiversity of urban areas. Their presence can be considered a thumbs-up for the quality of a city’s urban ecology.
Urban coyotes often switch from naturally diurnal and crepuscular activity to nocturnal activity.

When urban residents see coyotes “in broad daylight” it is often assumed that the coyote has grown overly bold or is ill in some way. Actually, it is perfectly normal for a coyote to be out during the day, as this is their natural time for hunting.

Urban coyotes have made a behavior change to avoid humans, switching from being active at dawn and dusk or during daylight hours, to being mostly active at night. This strategy lowers their risk of encountering a species of which they are naturally afraid while still hunting in an urban territory.

However, if a coyote needs to be out during the day to hunt or to get from one place to another, there isn’t necessarily anything wrong or odd about the coyote’s behavior. In fact, in the spring and summer when raising their pups, coyotes need to find more food and so may be more active during the day and thus spotted more often. Urban residents frequently misinterpret daytime sightings as a rise in the urban coyote population or that the coyote could be rabid, neither of which are usually true.
Urban coyotes reduce the presence of feral and free-roaming cats in natural spaces, which helps protect songbirds in parks.

Stan Gehrt, the study’s lead author, told Science Daily, “Free-roaming cats are basically partitioning their use of the urban landscape. They’re not using the natural areas in cities very much because of the coyote presence there. It reduces the cats’ vulnerability to coyotes, but at the same time, it means the coyotes are essentially protecting these natural areas from cat predation.”

Coyotes have a clear impact on how free-roaming cats use the urban landscape, but the exact scope of the ecological benefit still needs more study. Urban Coyote Research Program points out, “Within cities, domestic cats may be the most abundant mesocarnivore in some parts of the urban landscape. Free-roaming cats have been reported to depredate native wildlife and, in some instances, appear to have reduced or even extirpated some populations. However, data on the population ecology of free-ranging cats, and especially aspects that relate to potential predation or disease risk, are needed. This information gap is especially true for cats inhabiting urban landscapes, where their numbers can reach inordinately high levels and the systems are already stressed from other anthropogenic effects.”

While the issue of cats and coyotes is a sensitive and controversial one, there are aspects of their interaction that may come as a happy surprise. In a 2013 study, urban coyote researchers collared 39 feral cats. They found that while urban coyotes tend to stick to parks, wilderness preserves and other fragments of green habitats, the cats steer clear of coyotes’ turf. The felines keep out of these small patches of wilderness and thus aren’t predating songbirds. Songbirds aren’t really on a coyote’s menu, so they have a better chance to thrive when coyotes are present and deterring mesopredators such as cats. Other studies in California showed that coyotes reducing cat activity in habitat fragments resulted in an increase in the nesting success of songbirds in those habitats.
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Urban coyotes help control the populations of other sometimes problematic urban wildlife like rodents, deer and Canada geese.

It’s so easy to think of urban places as home to humans, pigeons, crows and raccoons, and that’s about it. But our cities are increasingly home to an ever more diverse array of wildlife species. Unfortunately, these species are not beneficial when they become overabundant. Canada geese can wreak havoc on baseball fields and golf courses, deer can easily become a nuisance in yards and gardens of residential housing and spread disease-carrying ticks, and rats have been an issue in cities ever since cities were invented. Coyotes play a role in limiting the populations of these species and more, helping to keep a balance and increase biodiversity in urban ecosystems.

Rodents are the primary food source for coyotes in rural and urban areas alike, and studies have shown an increase in the rodent population in areas where coyotes are removed. Deer fawns are also a prey source for coyotes, and coyotes can take anywhere from 20 percent to 80 percent of fawns in various populations. Because coyotes rarely ever take adult deer, they don’t cause a reduction in populations, but they do help to stabilize or slow the growth of deer populations in urban and suburban areas.

The same goes for Canada geese; the presence of coyotes is highly beneficial to slow the growth of goose populations, which helps out managers of parks, golf courses, sporting fields and other grassy areas that geese graze in abundance. Urban Coyote Research Program writes, “By placing modified video cameras at the nests, this project was able to identify coyotes as the major predator on the nests. Thus, coyotes are serving as a biocontrol for urban geese. Because egg contents are not detected in coyote scat, the extent of coyote predation on goose nests could only be determined by placing cameras at nests. As with deer, coyotes do not take enough adult geese to reduce the population, but they can slow the population increase through egg predation.”

The predation of coyotes on deer and other species is often controversial, but it is important to remember that what we are witnessing is the return of an apex predator to an ecosystem. When apex predators are present, an ecosystem is more balanced and more diverse. Humans have cleared out other predators like wolves, cougars and bears from their historic territories but the coyote is now filling in this blank in the food web. What we are witnessing with coyotes taking up residence in urban and suburban areas is the return of an apex predator to an ecosystem, and watching what happens is a fascinating area of study for urban ecologists.
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The easiest way for city residents to avoid negative interactions with coyotes is to avoid feeding them, either accidentally or on purpose, and otherwise habituating them to humans.

When coyotes become overly bold or aggressive, and in the rare instances when coyotes have bitten humans, it usually is discovered that they were being fed.

Coyotes have a natural fear of humans, and like most wildlife, will start to lose that fear and even become aggressive if they are being fed. This is the reason wildlife managers warn people to never feed wildlife, and there is the saying, “A fed coyote is a dead coyote.”

Once a coyote loses its fear, it is likely to become a problem animal and that means animal control will have little choice but to lethally remove it.

Feeding coyotes sometimes happens on purpose, but it can also be done accidentally when people leave pet food on their porches intending it for cats or dogs, when they leave scattered seeds under the bird feeder, or even when they leave fallen fruit or compost in their yards.

Educating the public on the importance of not feeding wildlife and removing any food sources, as well as educating them on safe and humane coyote hazing strategies to maintain coyotes' fear of humans, is the best way a city can avoid negative interactions and instead enjoy quiet coexistence.
A common reaction from urban and suburban residents when they learn coyotes are living in their area is to ask for the removal of the coyotes, either through lethal means or by trapping and relocating them. However, animal control officers have learned through a lot of experience that this is not only a lot harder to do than it sounds, but it does nothing to reduce the number of coyotes living in an area. In fact, it has the opposite effect.

Coyotes are territorial and keep other coyotes out of their home range. The larger the territory of a coyote pack, the fewer coyotes are present overall. Removing coyotes from an area opens that location up for new coyotes to come in and claim it as their own (and there will always be more coyotes coming in to fill a void), often resulting in a short-term increase in coyotes as the territory lines are redrawn by the newcomers. Additionally, when there is less pressure from neighboring coyotes and more food available, female coyotes will have larger litters of pups, again creating a short-term increase in the number of coyotes in that area.
There are other problems with trapping coyotes. As the Humane Society points out, “The most common devices used to capture coyotes are leg-hold traps and neck snares. Both can cause severe injuries, pain, and suffering. Leg-hold traps are not only cruel and inhumane for coyotes, but may also injure other wildlife, pets, or even children. Non-target wild animals are also caught in traps, and many sustain injuries so severe that they die or must be killed.”

If a city wants to limit or reduce the number of urban coyotes living there, the easiest thing to do is allow existing coyotes to work out their own territories, naturally stabilizing the coyote population. There will never be more coyotes in an ecosystem than that ecosystem can support, so (despite what some may think) a city can never become “overpopulated” or “infested” with coyotes.

Citizens can take extra steps to make an area less appealing to coyotes by removing all extra food sources – from fallen fruit or ripe vegetables from backyard gardens to pet food left on back porches – and removing sources of water. The fewer resources available, the larger the territories need to be to support the resident coyotes, and the fewer coyotes there are overall.

This is not to say that removal of problem coyotes isn’t necessary. If a coyote has become so bold that it begins targeting pets as prey or biting people and the coyote’s behavior is beyond being solved by hazing techniques, then removal is the only solution left to animal control officers. Unfortunately, this typically means lethal removal. Relocation is not an option because it doesn’t fix the problem behavior, and actually puts the coyote in danger as it can be hit by cars as it tries to return back to its home territory or can be injured in fights with the resident coyotes of territories it passes through. Targeted removal of a specific problem animal is a very different issue than the indiscriminate removal of any and all coyotes.

Coyotes are here to stay and removing them is not and will never be an option. Our one and only path forward is coexistence.