

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Illustration by Chris Hill

Humanely Managing Coyotes in Our Neighborhoods and Backyards

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main street.

Generally, coyotes shy away from humans and avoid contact with them. In urban and suburban areas, however, coyotes may be less likely to fear people and more likely to associate them with an easy, dependable food source. Here is some information on coyotes and on ways that you can effectively and humanely keep them afar.

General Information

The coyote is a member of the same family as foxes, dogs, and wolves—the canids. The name comes from the Aztec word for the species, *coyotl*, which, loosely translated, means “trickster.” The eastern coyote is the type found in Massachusetts.

Coyotes vary in size depending on location but generally are 4–4½ feet long including the tail, stand 18–25 inches tall at the shoulder, and weigh 20–50 pounds. A coyote may be gray, brown, or tan above and white or light color underneath, with a straight, bushy tail.

Coyotes are adaptable and can live in a wide range of climates and conditions—from suburbia to

wilderness, sea level to more than 10,000 feet in altitude—and are now found in all states except Hawaii. They are territorial. The males mark their boundaries with urine, as do many canids. The size of the territory is directly related to the quality of the habitat, and often it can take several square miles to support a coyote family.

Coyotes are omnivorous and make use of an astonishing variety of plant

Make sure you are not inadvertently attracting coyotes by leaving out open trash containers, feeding pets outside, or leaving spilled bird seed on the ground, which can attract small rodents that then can attract coyotes.

and animal foods, including garbage, insects, rodents, rabbits, birds, deer, carrion, and even berries and fruits. Coyotes also play an important role in controlling rodent populations.

Coyotes breed during February or March and give birth in April or May. The litter size varies, depending, in part, upon environmental conditions and coyote population density. The pups nurse for up to two months, mature quickly, and

are fully independent at about nine months. As long as offspring are small and unable to hunt, the male coyote provides protection and food for the family unit.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

Generally, coyotes are extremely shy and avoid contact with humans. In urban and suburban areas, however, coyotes may be less likely to fear people and more likely to associate them with an easy, dependable food source. Some have been known to come up to the doors of homes if food is regularly present. Pets, especially cats and small dogs, are seen by coyotes as a food source and should be protected. If you live in an area where there are coyotes, it is important to supervise children and pets when they are outside. Make sure you are not inadvertently attracting coyotes by leaving out open trash containers, feeding pets outside, or leaving spilled bird seed on the ground, which can attract small rodents that then can attract coyotes.

Numerous nonlethal strategies can discourage coyote predation on livestock, including guard animals (dogs, donkeys, llamas), smell and taste aversion substances, shock devices, noise devices, and portable fencing. Poultry and hobby livestock can be well protected from coyotes with fencing (both structural and electric) and by ensuring that the animals are properly con-

fined in well-built cages or pens each evening.

Historically, trapping has never been a method for managing coyote populations in Massachusetts. In the past few decades, there have only been two land trapping seasons for taking coyotes. Hunting is more commonly used in the state for killing coyotes; the coyote-hunting season lasts four months.

If coyotes should pose a threat to public health or safety, the law allows for the use of prohibited traps for capturing those problem animals. Because conflicts most often occur in suburban areas, trapping should be conducted responsibly. A special permit is required.

THE LIVING WITH WILDLIFE MISSION

The MSPCA Living With Wildlife program aims to protect wild species, now and in the future. The program promotes peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife in urban, suburban, and rural Massachusetts communities by helping to resolve human-animal conflicts in a humane, nonlethal, long-term, and cost-effective manner.

Public-Health Concerns

Like all warm-blooded animals, coyotes may contract rabies. If you suspect that an animal has rabies, contact your local animal-control officer.

For more information about humanely solving human-wildlife conflicts or about the MSPCA's Living With Wildlife program, call (617) 522-7400, visit www.livingwithwildlife.org, or e-mail lww@mspca.org.