

# Coping with neighborhood coyotes

The wild canines, while keeping the rodent population down, also are predators of cats who wander from home

**A** coyote howling at the full moon — the quintessential image of the American West.

Except this one was sitting at the intersection of Southwest Luradel Street and Southwest Ridgeview Lane in Portland one Sunday night two weeks ago.

Coyotes increasingly call Portland neighborhoods home. Their presence, while beneficial in almost every way, requires some adjustments of pet owners, especially this time of year.

The wild canines were rarely seen west of the Cascades until the 1940s. They've preferred the prairies and grasslands of eastern Oregon and beyond.

But, according to a report commissioned by Multnomah County in 1996, clear-cutting of forests and the eradication of wolves in Oregon allowed the coyote to expand its range considerably. Though shy around humans, the coyote has shown itself to be a highly adaptable predator in urban areas.



**JACQUES  
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PET TALK

In cities, humans have added to the coyotes' already broad menu options, providing garbage, compost and, yes, small pets that roam outside.

"They're going to take an easy meal," says Karen Houston, a ranger at Tryon Creek State Natural Area, which has a pack of coyotes — there are typically six to a pack — living in it. "If you let your cat out at night near

this park, you can assume it's fair game for a coyote."

That coyote howling at the intersection was about a half-mile from the park. Right in front of Jesse Brown's house.

Brown's border collie-greyhound mix, Chandler, "goes berserk" a few times a week, along with every other dog on the block, Brown says. Nine out of 10 times, he says, he can spot the coyote the dogs sensed.

"This is the coyote highway right here," Brown says about a woodland that extends from his house down to a creek by



Southwest Lancaster Road.

Brown recently took photos and video of a coyote relaxing in sunshine behind his house. Another day, he saw a coyote pup playing in the wooded portion of his property.

"It was rolling around, chasing its tail," he says. "It was pretty amazing to see."

That pup is what makes coyotes particularly active, and hungry, right now. From now until late June it's denning

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**Jesse Brown of Southwest Portland regularly spots coyotes in his yard; they come over from nearby Tryon Creek State Natural Area.**

JESSE BROWN

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# Von Lunen: Whatever you do, don't feed coyotes

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season, when the young nurse to full size. That requires extra energy of the adults. It also makes them very protective of the den.

Usually, a dog the size of 75-pound Chandler wouldn't have to worry about his wild cousins, which weigh 25 to 30 pounds on average. But if a big dog walked up to a coyote den now, the pack would defend the young.

Brown keeps his cat indoors at all times. That's a good idea, as a lot of cats have gone "missing" around this part of the city.

A half-mile up the hill, Susan Shipman walks through the Quail Park neighborhood pointing out the houses whose residents have lost cats, most likely to coyotes. She's seen coyotes walk right through her yard and has found the remains of three cats on her property. None of them were hers — her cats stay inside, always.

Residents in Quail Park have set up an informal neighborhood watch for coyotes. When Shipman sees one, she calls a handful of neighbors who in turn alert others. Recently, she got a call that a cat was missing.

"The next day I went looking," she says. "I found fur, the collar and blood on the road."

Despite the gruesome find, Shipman and her neighbors don't seem to hold a grudge against the predators.

"We're mixing urban area and wildlife," Shipman says. "We just have to learn how to live with them."

Brown echoes that sentiment. "I don't want them labeled a menace to the neighborhood," he says. "We have to try to coexist."

That's exactly right, says Portland's pre-eminent coyote expert. Bob Sallinger, conservation director for the Audubon Society of Portland, has suggestions for owners of small pets.

Keep pets indoors. Pick up downed fruit. Cover your compost. And, above all, don't feed the coyotes.

Apparently, some people leave out dog food to attract coyotes to their yards. This is a really bad idea, Sallinger says.

The one recorded case of a coyote killing a human in U.S. history occurred in California in the 1970s, when a family continuously fed a coyote, which became unafraid of humans. One day, the family's 3-year-old was left alone in the backyard.

Coyotes are curious animals and may observe people from a distance. But if they're not habituated to humans, they won't approach, let alone attack. The best way to keep them out of a neighborhood is to make them feel unwelcome, Sallinger says.

"Scream, blow a whistle, clap your hands or throw rocks"

whenever you see a coyote, he says. "If the whole neighborhood does it, they get very shy very quickly."

Although many coyote sightings — and missing cats — have been in Southwest Portland, coyotes live in every Portland neighborhood, Sallinger says. They can make a home in an abandoned lot or a small strip of greenspace.

Citywide, coyotes are virtually impossible to eliminate, Sallinger says. Killing an individual coyote only opens up its habitat to other coyotes, which replace it almost instantly.

Coyotes also employ "compensatory breeding strategies," Sallinger says. Typically, only the alpha male and female of a pack breed. But if pack members are killed, the remaining coyotes start breeding, pushing their numbers higher.

Furthermore, the methods used to kill coyotes — leg-hold traps, devices that release lethal sodium cyanide and neck snares — also kill roaming pets.

There's no reason to want coyotes gone anyway, say the experts.

Without coyotes, the local rodent population would skyrocket to four or five times its current level, Sallinger says.

Houston, the Tryon Creek ranger, says a single coyote takes several rats and mice every night. She's convinced the park's resident pack is the reason the Tryon Creek nature center is clear of rodents.

"We like having (coyotes) around," she says. "They balance our ecosystem."

Coyotes also do that for the local Canada geese population, too, Sallinger says.

The birds' numbers have increased exponentially in recent years, devastating parks and impacting water quality. But coyotes, ever the opportunists, have discovered the geese as a food source.

"Coyotes are amazing animals," Sallinger says. "We're very fortunate to have them around. We shouldn't want to get rid of them."

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