

Coyotes: To Be Feared or Revered?

With the recent sightings of coyotes, much attention is being paid to our population of coyotes. As evidenced by area articles dating back to 1993, the concern is not new to Ridgefield. The coyote is not native to Connecticut, being first documented in the 1950's and first recorded in this area some thirty years ago. Despite the relatively recent arrival of this canine, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection considers the population to be stable, not growing.

If the population is not growing, then how does one explain the increase in sightings? Coyotes are opportunistic, and while their numbers are not increasing, their willingness to exploit suburban food sources is. Our compost piles, bird feeders, gardens that attract rabbits and other rodents, garbage cans, dog bowls, water sources, and the occasional person who intentionally feeds them, provide endless opportunities for an easy meal. Combine the availability of food, a propensity to be territorial, and a lowered fear of humans and we have a recipe for problems.

Fortunately, the coyote foreshadows trouble with incremental behavioral changes. The first sign of territorial behavior is not killing the family pet; there will likely be several indicators that precede such a distressing act. Patterns to watch for are:

- 1) An increase in observing coyotes on streets and in yards at night
- 2) An increase in coyotes approaching adults and/or
- 3) Early morning and late afternoon daylight observance of coyotes on streets and in parks and yards
- 4) Daylight observance of coyotes chasing or taking pets
- 5) Coyotes attacking and taking pets on leash or in close proximity to their owners; coyotes chasing joggers, bicyclists, and other adults
- 6) Coyotes seen in and around children's play areas, school grounds, and parks in mid-day
- 7) Coyotes acting aggressively toward adults during mid-day.

The best means to prevent this behavior from progressing is to keep coyotes wary of humans. When they are seen, scare them off using loud sounds, spraying the hose and/or throwing sticks or stones. Do not let the coyote intimidate you. Do not engage the animals with pleasant calls or sounds. Definitely reduce/eliminate food sources. Food source is a trigger for defending a territory. Taking of small pets may not be an issue of territory. Pets such as cats and small dogs are seen as prey and as the coyote becomes more comfortable closer to your home, the more vulnerable your pet is.

Seeing wildlife amid our suburban landscape is a gift. But even this gift has to be managed responsibly such that we do not inadvertently contribute to a situation that results in harm to our pets, the coyote, or ourselves.

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