

Increased Coyote Sightings Worry Residents

Paige Seburn

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Coyotes have long been part of Niagara-on-the Lake's landscape, but sightings this season have some residents on edge.

Wandering through gardens, stalking pets and lingering in tourist areas, the coyotes have some people too afraid to walk their dogs or let pets outside.

But the Humane Society of Greater Niagara says more sightings don't necessarily mean there are more coyotes — and the Ministry of Natural Resources says it hasn't received any recent reports from the area.

Cortnie Welychka, the humane society's senior manager of operations, said the rise in sightings is likely due to growing public awareness, more homes near natural corridors like the Niagara Escarpment, and faster information-sharing through social media and "neighbourhood networks."

"Coyotes have always been present in Niagara," she said.

As agencies and the town aim to balance co-existence with safety, officials stress the importance of not feeding coyotes, as this can cause them to lose their fear of people and become aggressive.

Some residents, meanwhile, want stronger measures to keep coyotes out of urban areas.

Welychka said NOTL offers an ideal environment for coyotes: its mix of neighbourhoods, farmland and tourist areas provides easy access to food and shelter.

Unsecured garbage, pet food, compost, bird seed and fallen fruit — plus the rodents they attract — all draw coyotes in, while thick brush, vineyards and green spaces offer cover for denning and travel.



Coyotes spotted near Delater Street in Old Town's dock area. The family of coyotes was just casually stopped in the street, itching and scratching. BARBARA WORTHY

Old Town resident Sheryl Johnson said she will not take her three Yorkies, Mia, Portia and Pandora, for a walk, or let them into her backyard.

Johnson once encountered what she thinks was a coywolf — a coyote-wolf hybrid — that stalked her while walking her two Yorkie-Havanese mixes. “I picked up both dogs and I ran,” she said. She most often sees coyotes on Ball, Delater, Ricardo and sometimes Front streets: Busy areas near hotels, beaches and tourist foot traffic.

As more subdivisions go up, coyotes are being pushed closer to town, with some appearing almost tame, coming out in daylight “in a way they have never come out before,” she said.

“But they never can be tamed,” said Johnson.

Last fall, a friend of hers lost her chihuahua to a coyote. All the owners heard was a rustle and a whimper, Johnson said — coyotes attack quickly and quietly.

Resident Barbara Worthy said she's seen coyotes around for years, but never this many, leaving her feeling she's living in “watchful cautiousness,” she said.

“I can’t go out walking down the street at night anymore outside my house,” she said, calling the issue “an inevitable problem of nature and urbanites.”

A coyote once came around the corner and up Worthy’s driveway in Old Town as she was getting into her car. She quickly scooped up her dog, Louie — a 10-year-old, six-pound white multi-poo — and got him inside.

“We don’t want to eradicate these wonderful animals,” she said. “But we don’t need them to be urbanized like this.”

Feeding wildlife, purposefully or not, increases the risk of conflict, said Welychka, and is banned under town bylaws.

Mike Fenn, spokesperson for the Ministry of Natural Resources, said coyotes are “opportunistic feeders” — over time, they may become aggressive and lose their fear of humans, associating people with food.

Coyotes are not inherently dangerous: that’s a misconception, Welychka said. They’re shy and tend to avoid humans. Aggression is rare and typically linked to feeding or habituation.

Lethal control is often misguided, she added, as removing coyotes may only make room for others to move in or breed more.

Clapping, yelling, banging pots, using air horns, waving arms or flapping a garbage bag can scare coyotes off. Spraying water or opening umbrellas also helps, she said, stressing the need for consistent “hazing.”

Pet owners should be especially cautious. Welychka said small animals can look like prey and should never be left unattended, especially at dawn or dusk, “when coyotes are most active.”

Dogs should be walked on short, non-retractable leashes, cats kept indoors and outdoor food sources cleaned up. Motion lights, fencing and other deterrents can also help.

Fenn said anyone who encounters a coyote should stay calm, make lots of noise, use a flashlight, avoid turning their back and never approach. “Once at a safe distance, contact 911,” he said.

Marah Minor, the town’s communications co-ordinator, said that while the town does not intervene in routine sightings, it may step in if a coyote poses a public safety risk.

Johnson called the town’s response “problematic.” “What, they have to bite somebody before the town can do anything?” she asked.

Johnson wants signs in high-activity areas, more enforcement of property standards in those areas and relocation options explored.

“I don’t want to cause (coyotes) harm,” she said.

Managing them should be like bears, she said: Reduce food sources and keep out of urban areas.

Minor said the town’s approach focuses on public education, with tips, reporting guidance, and safety info available on its website at notl.com/coyotes.

paigeseburn@niagaranow.com