

# Warning for Small Dog Owners: Coyote Attacks on the Rise

Once identified with prairies and mountainous areas of the Old West, coyotes are now getting bolder as their habitats are becoming more populated by humans. They've been encroaching on metro areas of cities like Detroit, increasing the number of attacks and fatalities against small pets.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Rising numbers of reports that small pets are missing, injured and even killed in the areas in a 30-minute radius of metro Detroit, officials warn, include lighted areas and fenced yards
- Homeowners have reported missing, killed or injured pets, mostly small dogs, but also cats and other small animals
- A coyote, which means "talking dog," is a wild dog that is smaller and more lightweight than a wolf, and coyotes have narrower snouts and large ears in relation to the size of their heads
- Coyotes have increased the range they typically travel as a result of a changing landscape and human intolerance of wolves, the coyote's natural enemy
- There are a number of things you can do to protect your pets if you suspect or are aware of the presence of coyote in your vicinity, such as always leashing your pets before letting them outside and checking your area beforehand

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Coyote sightings were historically connected to remote areas, such as those with dense forests, but tell that to the coyotes that have set up residence in metro areas across America, including Detroit, a city much more associated with bright lights, paved streets and lots of people.

In fact, Detroit news outlets are all abuzz about not just coyote sightings, but rising numbers of reports that small pets are missing, injured and even killed. Understandably, residents are getting increasingly nervous about walking their dogs, letting their cats out and allowing their young children to play outdoors.

In 2018, Tony Tesen took her two dogs outside their Northville Township home at around 11:30 p.m., when her 11-year-old toy poodle Stanley saw movement in surrounding shrubs. Then, in the lighted yard, Tesen saw the back end of an animal with a fat tail. Stanley ran toward it just as she realized it was a coyote. Tesen watched with horror as the coyote carried her pet off through a field, with her chasing in her house slippers, yelling as loud as she could.

To no avail, however. She and her husband had adopted Stanley as a rescue dog five years earlier, but they never saw him again. "Stanley was there one minute and the coyote was there the next," she said later.<sup>1</sup> Tesen's only consolation was that once her dog was snatched, she never heard a sound from him.

Unfortunately, that's one of several incidents that have occurred in metro Detroit in the last couple years. Some reports involve dogs that are missing, even from fenced yards, with owners at a loss as to what happened to them. Kirsten Thomas from the 12 Mile Road area of Royal Oak, told reporters she let her two small dogs out, got a cup of coffee and returned to let the dogs in. Detroit Free Press reported:

*"She and her husband said they searched for Oliver and found some fresh blood and remains. They suspected a coyote attack, went down to nearby train tracks and spotted two apparent dens. In April, a 5-year-old miniature pinscher named Rocky, adopted by Colleen Burke and her family, was snatched from his Farmington Hills backyard, dragged through a creek and found with fatal neck injuries in a neighbor's yard.*

*Coyotes were suspected in the death of the 9-pound dog, who was let out about 5 a.m. with a 65-pound coon hound, Guinness. Rocky was barely alive when he was found, but didn't survive."*<sup>2</sup>

## **What Are Coyotes, Exactly?**

Encyclopedia Britannica<sup>3</sup> notes that coyotes, or *canis latrans*, which means "talking dog," are wild dogs that, in the days of the pioneers, were called prairie wolf or brush wolf, and once were found almost exclusively in large areas where sagebrush and brushy mountains are part of the terrain. Smaller and more lightweight than a wolf, which has a broad snout and a large nose, coyotes have narrower snouts and large ears in relation to the size of their heads.

And according to Coyote Smarts, "The coyote is a native species that has increased its range as a result of human alteration of the landscape and human intolerance of wolves, the coyote's natural enemy." In addition:

*"Eastern coyote DNA reveals that, as coyotes spread through southern Canada, they occasionally interbred with the wolves they encountered. As a result, our eastern coyotes are larger than their western counterparts. With a typical weight of 30 [to] 50 pounds and a length of 48 to 60 inches (nose to tail), they can sometimes reach twice the size of their more diminutive relatives."*<sup>4</sup>

Further, as coyotes have expanded the range in which they wander farther from their more western and isolated environs, they've also expanded their menu. Where they once ate a typical diet of mice, rabbits, moles and other indigenous wild creatures, in the absence of those, small pets found wandering alone in backyards, parks and pond areas are an easy target.

## **Police Warn Detroit and Surrounding Area Residents**

After a couple reported their Jack Russell terrier had been killed by a coyote when they let him out to relieve himself, police in Canton, Michigan, located a half hour west of Detroit, issued formal warnings to residents. It hadn't been an isolated report, as it followed a similar instance in March of 2016, when another pet dog, a Bichon Frise, was killed in an unfenced backyard, also in Canton.

The Canton Police Department's community relations officer warned that coyote activity typically rises between January and March during the animals' breeding season, especially since it's harder for them to find food during that time of year. Although coyote may be more inclined to encroach on less populated areas such as weedy lawns and abandoned houses, their motivation to find sustenance may or may not be deterred by metro areas where more people live.

In Warren, 30 minutes north of Detroit, a resident almost lost his 14-year-old miniature dachshund, Bella, when a coyote attacked the dog outside his home, costing an estimated \$1,200 in veterinary bills for two surgeries. Detroit Free Press noted:

*"Bella, who weighs about 6 pounds, was attacked when she was outside to use the bathroom early one morning when it was still dark, he said. Payok said his son-in-law heard Bella yelping and saw the coyote with her in its mouth. He said his son-in-law screamed.*

*The coyote dropped Bella and ran into the woods. Payok said he thinks the coyote was under the deck and that's why it was able to grab Bella so fast. Payok said Bella had a '50-50 chance' of survival, but weeks later she is walking. Her fur is starting to grow back in, and 'she's doing fine now.'"<sup>5</sup>*

## **An Ever-Widening Circle**

The close call was yet another "heads up" that the coyote problem was, and is, getting worse. While there's the possibility that breeding season explains part of the problem, Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) wildlife communications coordinator Holly Vaughn says the coyote now are at a point where they believe humans are invading their territory instead of the other way around.

Looking at the reports and their frequency, police could see there was a pattern of coyote attacks on small animals belonging first to residents near large wooded areas leading to rural communities. Suburbia at large was being inundated with a growing coyote population encroaching on a wide range of surrounding counties that ripples inward to metro Detroit, a city of nearly 700,000 people.

Additionally, spring and summer is when people may catch sight of coyotes, and it can happen even in residential neighborhoods, just as it has in metro Detroit. When coyotes are raising their pups, the sightings may occur any time of the day and night. Especially if they can be heard, as they're quite vocal, residents should be vigilant. Coyotes also have a distinctive set of sounds they make:

*"It uses a long howl to report its location, short barks to warn of danger, yips when reuniting with pack members, growls when establishing dominance, whines and whimpers when bonding, and high-pitched barks to summon pups."<sup>6</sup>*

While Vaughn reveals that MDNR doesn't have an official count of pet deaths due to coyote attacks in the Detroit area, the 5-mile-radius "stomping grounds" of the predatory animal has expanded so quickly because they often use river embankments and railroad tracks to access downtown areas and, more and more frequently, roads and highways.

## **Coyotes: Habits and Habitats**

Coyotes used to run in packs, which become stronger when members help protect the territories they decide to call their own. But the ever-widening areas man has taken over have changed the landscape, quite literally, so the animals may run in pairs or alone. Single coyotes unconnected to any pack are called "transients." Often, they're juvenile yearlings who have either wandered away or been driven off by an "alpha" pair. Disease can pare down their numbers, but again, modern life has changed everything.

*"The average lifespan of a coyote in the wild is [6] to [8] years, while coyotes in captivity can live twice as long. In places where coyotes are the top predator, humans are usually their greatest threat. In rural areas, a major cause of death is hunting or trapping, while in urban areas it is usually automobiles. Laws regarding hunting vary from state to state, but in many places it is always open season on coyotes, although the use of traps and poisons may be restricted or prohibited."*<sup>7</sup>

According to Vaughn, coyotes are quite common throughout Michigan, and they can be found in both urban and rural areas. ZooKeys, a peer-reviewed journal supplying data and information in zoology,<sup>8</sup> explains coyotes have undergone an expansion across both North and South America, mostly since 1900, even as other species have been in decline.

Reports maintain that they may be the new top predator in eastern North America as well as around other areas of the continent. In fact, the present migration may represent a 40% expansion of their areas since 1900.

According to the Urban Coyote Research Project,<sup>9</sup> investigators have tagged more than 1,000 coyotes and radio-collared more than 400 of them. The members' research shows that not only have there never been attacks on humans in the state of Michigan, coyotes are still viewed as not only highly sophisticated, wily animals, but bloodthirsty and vengeful as well, but that's not true, Vaughn says.

## **Other Statistics on Coyote Attacks on Humans and Animals**

Still, officials report two fatal attacks on humans; one, when a 19-year-old woman in Nova Scotia was brought down and fatally injured by a pack of coyotes while hiking alone in a national park in 2009, and a 3-year-old girl who was killed in California in 1981. But there are in-betweens:

*"[The Urban Coyote Research Project] also researched coyote attacks — bites to humans — in both countries from 1985 to 2006. It found 142 attack incidents, resulting in 159 human victims. The attacks occurred over a wide geographic area, including 14 states in the U.S. and four provinces in Canada. Most of the attacks occurred in the western United States, including California and Arizona."*<sup>10</sup>

There are different ways to check statistics on coyote attacks, including Chicago-area newspaper databases, and the results are somewhat sobering. Besides alleged attacks on a duck and a pig, there were 70 attacks on dogs and 10 attacks on cats. Between 1990 and 2004 in the Chicago metro area, the number of attacks on pets "increased from zero to two per year, to six to 14 per year.

## **What Residents Can Do to Protect Their Pets**

One reason many people don't see coyotes until an attack on small pets is that they're "extremely good at remaining unnoticed by humans, even while living in close proximity."<sup>11</sup> The families who tragically lost their pets due to coyote attacks are now much more careful with their other animals, and they caution others to be, as well.

"These things do happen. It can happen to you," Jim Tesen says. "You gotta take these warnings seriously and watch your dogs."<sup>12</sup> They also have changed their routines, knowing that coyotes are very clever.

The most common theme police have been passing along is that residents should never leave their pets unattended outside, even for a few minutes, especially if they're small. Vaughn advises anyone living on the outskirts of Detroit with outwards of a 30-minute drive that, rather than allowing small pets to go outside by themselves, even in a fenced backyard or a populated street, they should always:

- Leash each pet before going out
- Check the area to make sure a coyote isn't lurking
- Carry a strong flashlight
- Avoid going near to, touching or intentionally feeding a coyote
- Put out garbage the morning it's due to be collected rather than the night before, and remove other possible food sources such as bird feeders and pet foods

If you happen to see a coyote (or think one or more could be in the vicinity), bang pots and pans or clap your hands to keep them from getting closer, MDNR officials advise.

## Sources and References

<sup>1, 2, 5, 10, 11, 12</sup> [Detroit Free Press June 4, 2018](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Encyclopedia Britannica September 12, 2024](#)

<sup>4, 6, 7</sup> [Coyote Smarts 2014](#)

<sup>8</sup> [ZooKeys May 22, 2018](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Urban Coyote Research Project 2018](#)

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