

Naturalist's Corner
Wolves in our Midst
September 2015



Arriving at my Mom's home in Springfield, I spotted a strange-looking dog by her driveway. Its eyes pierced my very being. I stopped the car. The animal crossed in front of me, turned to look back at me with its x-ray eyes, then sauntered off into the woods. It was then I realized the animal was not a dog. It was a coyote. In my back woods I sometimes hear a triumphant chorus of coyote howls, but I live in the country and hear those sounds only at a distance. What was a coyote doing in Springfield?

I had to find out more about this eastern coyote, or "coydog" as some people call it. Coyotes, it seems, probably reached northern New England in the 1930s and Western Massachusetts in the 1950s. But I was surprised to learn that this contemporary eastern coyote is in fact a new animal: Apparently, even as wolves were killed off in the Northeast, a few of those surviving bred with the coyote, producing a hybrid larger than the western coyote. Genetic studies of the contemporary eastern coyote show it has a complex ancestry: 13% eastern wolf, 13% western wolf, and 10% domestic dog, mingled with the contributions of its coyote forebears. Thus, some genetic features of New England wolves live on in the coyotes that now roam our woods, suburbs, and cities. Perhaps it is hybridization with the domestic dog that has fostered the remarkable ease of coyotes in close proximity to humans. Hybridization with wolves, central to the history of our contemporary eastern coyote, is not a prominent feature in the history of the western coyote: By contrast, while at Yellowstone, our Naturalists' Club group learned that the wolf and coyote there compete for the same food. They are not on friendly terms and do not hybridize.

The contemporary eastern coyote is large and adaptable, living on anything from grass to frogs, from bugs to carrion, from pets to garbage. In the Southeast, farmers complain of coyotes eating watermelons. Eastern coyotes are big enough to bring down deer. They made their entree into the niche of top predator after wolves here had been extirpated. Each pack defends an area of about 15 square miles. Lone coyotes may travel 300 miles, looking for a territory of their own. Now the eastern coyote is the only predator in this state whose numbers are increasing; the Massachusetts coyote population is estimated at 5,000 to 10,000 individuals. Coyotes have been sighted on Cape Cod and even in Boston. I can certainly attest to their presence in Springfield. In addition to its skill and versatility in finding food, the coyote benefits

from high fecundity and rapid growth. In spring, a female can give birth to between 2 and 10 pups. Pups grow up so quickly that by fall they are able to feed themselves. Wolves have had a bad reputation since the time of Little Red Riding Hood and The Three Little Pigs. Here in New England, the eastern gray wolf was methodically driven out. In 1820 farmers set fire to Mount Monadnock to ensure wolves could not den there. In Yellowstone, bringing back the wolf in the mid-1990s was controversial. (As naturalists, we probably have great respect for the wolf and likely are supporters of its reintroduction.)

Has the long-feared wolf been re-introduced, replicated in the genetics of this new eastern coyote? If so, should we be wary of this wolf relative in our midst? To better understand this animal that is part wolf, let's turn to statistics: Never has there been a verified attack by a wolf on a human in Massachusetts; rather, the wolf's bad reputation comes from its preying on livestock. Similarly, in today's urban, suburban, and rural settings, coyotes are known to prey on unattended pets. Veterinarians have long suggested we keep our cats inside (not only for the cats' sake but for the wild birds they hunt at our bird feeders). It is, likewise, useful to compare dangers posed by coyotes to dangers posed by the domestic dog: Annually 4.7 million dog bites are reported in the United States, 800,000 requiring medical attention. Each day approximately 1,000 Americans visit the emergency room seeking treatment for dog bites. By contrast, just five coyote bites are recorded in the annals of Massachusetts.

This past January, I was honored to be present at a small ceremony held at the Roosevelt Gate at Yellowstone to commemorate the 20th year anniversary of the wolf's reintroduction, where I met some of the people who'd worked to make reestablishment possible. In Yellowstone over the intervening years, by getting too close to bison, many tourists have died, whereas by contrast, the wolf has vigilantly kept its distance for humans.

So join me in welcoming the coyote as our new neighbor, now known to be in every town and city in Massachusetts except Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. This new eastern coyote does not depend on wilderness and probably passes through your backyard at night. Perhaps you have heard a pack at night calling to each other, defending their turf or just singing for the sheer fun of it. It would seem that the wolf (or at least its genetic downline) has returned to our New England.

~ *Sonya Vickers*

A suggestion from Sonya: An interesting book on the eastern coyote is *Suburban Howls: Tracking the Eastern Coyote in Urban Massachusetts*, by Jonathan Way, who studies coyotes on Cape Cod and Boston