

Researchers trap and tag coyotes in Milwaukee as part of a plan to reduce conflicts and increase public awareness of coyotes. Many encounters occur during the breeding season when coyotes are protecting den sites.

# Urban coyotes

WHAT WISCONSIN CITIES ARE DOING TO HELP CITIZENS UNDERSTAND AND COEXIST WITH THEM.

*Marcus Smith*

A rarely seen and sometimes unsettling neighbor recently made its presence known again in southeast Wisconsin: the urban coyote.

Many recent sightings — and sometimes fateful encounters with pet dogs — have been on the rise in Milwaukee County suburbs since 2015. These were not the animals' first appearances in Milwaukee County. In fact, county residents have reported seeing coyotes as early as the 1970s, with more sightings in the late

1990s, according to newspaper reports. In light of this increase in sightings, Milwaukee County residents are looking for help with how to coexist with urban coyotes. The Department of Natural Resources and its stakeholders are working hard to answer questions and offer potential solutions.

## Why the increase in sightings?

At this point, neither the department nor Milwaukee County Parks officials know how many coyotes there are statewide or in Milwaukee County.

"Numbers are stable to increasing based on track surveys in the northern and central parts of the state, and we have no inventory of urban populations," says Dianne Robinson, a DNR wildlife biologist.

Robinson adds there's an increase in coyote activity from March to June, when they're establishing denning sites and eventually caring for pups. An adult coyote, averaging 25-35 pounds, will have an average litter of four to seven pups.

Because there's an ongoing research project in Chicago, Robinson says she has been able to turn to their research for advice.

"Two or three coyotes that we know of were collared in Chicago and have gotten all the way up here. Milwaukee coyotes likely go down there and even farther. They move out of their birth territory until they find a good area with good food and good habitat," she says, citing a study where coyotes have been found in downtown Chicago parking structures.

Robinson believes the birth calendar and protecting the den play a part in some of the coyote sightings and encounters in Milwaukee County.

"Sometimes where we see an altercation between an animal and a coyote, chances are pretty good that there's a den in that area," she says. "They don't actively search out pets to get into fights with."

## Sorting out fears from facts

Part of the fear associated with the presence of coyotes is they will attack more than just house pets. There haven't been any reported coyote attacks on humans in Wisconsin or elsewhere in the Midwest, but coyotes have attacked humans in other parts of the U.S. Although coyotes rarely display aggressive behavior toward humans, it is still important to be aware of their presence as wild animals in our neighborhoods. Using scare tactics and reducing wildlife feeding in your neighborhood can help to minimize any potential for problem situations.

Recent attacks on pet dogs have resulted in trauma and anxiety for their owners. Multiple reports from the fall of 2015 resulted in numerous public meetings about urban coyotes, and one encounter in May 2016 resulted in a nonfatal injury to a small dog. The Department of Natural Resources takes all of these reports seriously.

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**Dianne Robinson, DNR wildlife biologist, flags a cable restraint. The tags help identify locations where traps are set.**

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When citizens contact the Department of Natural Resources about coyote sightings or attacks on dogs, Robinson works with the caller to gather information about the attack or sighting, and recommends steps the owner can take to avoid future encounters. Robinson emphasizes it's important to always stay with your pet when it's outside. She says the majority of pet attacks occur when the pet is alone outside or not within view of the owner.

She informs the citizen they have a right to trap or hunt coyotes on their property year-round, provided they follow local rules and regulations. She also advises them to consider removing items that attract coyotes, such as a pet's food bowl, bird feeders or other potential food items that appeal to coyotes.

It's also important pet owners use proven, effective hazing techniques.

"In Milwaukee County, we've had coyotes that have lived near people for a number of years and are very comfortable with people," Robinson says. "If you see a coyote in your yard, wave your arms and yell at it to scare it away. If it doesn't scare, increase your intensity. Move toward the animal and act big and loud. Throw something near it. You're not trying to hurt the animal, just scare it away, and that can mean being rather aggressive."

Despite these unnerving encounters, there are benefits to having coyotes share our habitat. Coyotes remove road kill and their primary food source is rodents.

"They are a natural population control of the small animal population," Robinson says.

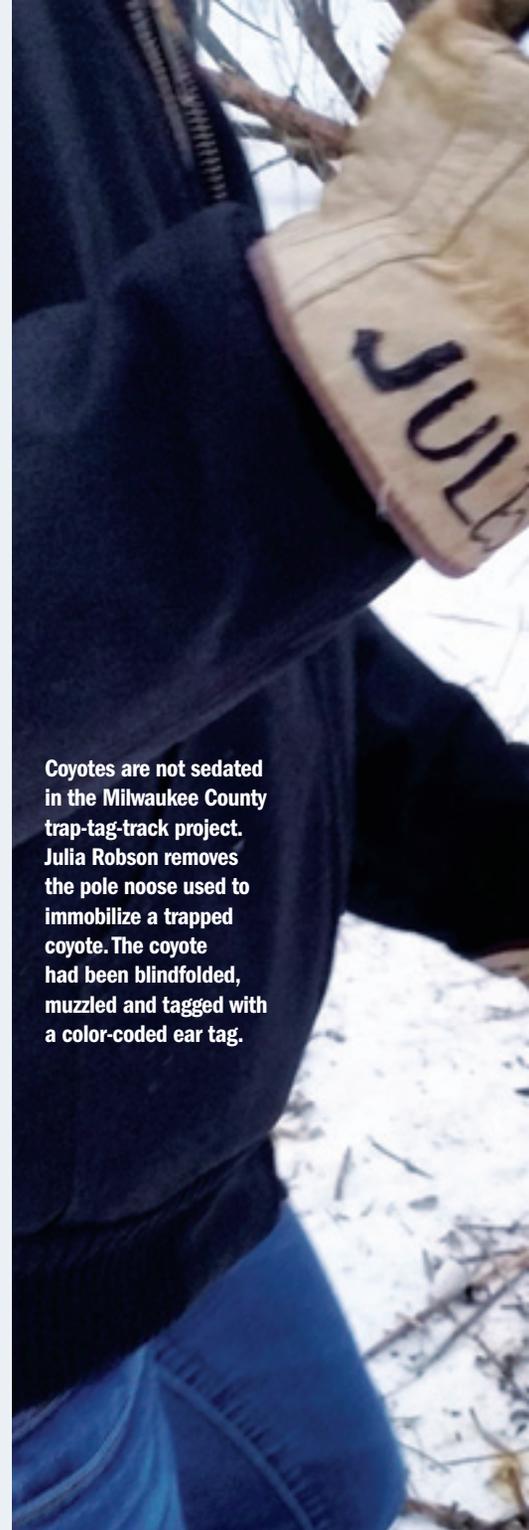
### Researchers partner to calm fears in Milwaukee County

The Department of Natural Resources and its stakeholders have made it a priority to educate the public about living with coyotes. DNR wildlife biologists are available to Milwaukee-area media. In late February 2016, DNR wildlife biologists and other coyote experts took part in a DNR-sponsored online chat answering questions and offering advice. From February to May 2016, DNR wildlife biologists, staff from the Milwaukee County Department of Parks and researchers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Urban Canid Project collaborated on public informational meetings called "Living with Urban Coyotes" in five Milwaukee County suburbs.

Milwaukee County officials have taken steps to address urban coyotes by developing a countywide coyote management plan with the Department of Natural Resources and the UW-Madison Urban Canid Project.

Milwaukee County Supervisor John Weishan introduced a resolution in November 2015 "to develop an action plan for mitigating coyote nuisance in Milwaukee County in collaboration with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources." The resolution references "multiple reported complaints related to coyotes in the City of Wauwatosa as a result of three separate fatal attacks on local residents' dogs."

In addition to allocating \$25,000 for funding, the resolution directs the Milwaukee County Department of Parks, Recreation and Culture to "collaborate with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to develop a strategic plan



**Coyotes are not sedated in the Milwaukee County trap-tag-track project. Julia Robson removes the pole noose used to immobilize a trapped coyote. The coyote had been blindfolded, muzzled and tagged with a color-coded ear tag.**

of action to address coyote nuisance within Milwaukee County, and to implement measures that ensure the safety of all residents and their respective property, which may include a removal procedure for patterned coyote nuisance." As of this writing, several communities in the county have developed or are in the process of developing their own coyote management plans.

Julia Robson, Milwaukee County assistant natural area coordinator, is one of the county employees tasked with developing and executing the county's coyote management plan. Robson says



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Researchers from the UW Urban Canid Project take measurements of a sedated, adult coyote caught at Curtis Prairie at the UW Arboretum in Madison.

the plan is designed to be proactive in reducing the number of coyote-related conflicts and increasing public awareness of coyotes and coyote behavior in Milwaukee.

The plan is comprised of several categories: urban coyote ecology, behavior and lethal and nonlethal management options. Under certain circumstances the plan recommends trapping and tagging coyotes with ear tags of different color combinations to aid in identification of specific individuals.

“We piloted the trap-tag-track project in Wauwatosa because we were aware of some potentially habituated animals in the area and we wanted to use the tagging program to engage in targeted lethal removal if necessary,” Robson says.

The trapping and tagging pilot began in February 2016 and ran for approximately 12 days at three sites along the Underwood Creek parkway.

Cable restraints are used for trapping because they’re an effective tool for capturing coyotes in urban settings where there are high densities of humans and domestic dogs on public lands, Robson says. All trapping complies with DNR regulations.

“In the event that a domestic pet becomes trapped in one of the restraints, the owner can usually figure out how to loosen the restraint and safely remove their pet. Foothold traps tend to be more complicated for an untrained individual to operate,” she adds.

The coyotes aren’t sedated but held in place by the cable restraint. Using a pole noose to immobilize the animal, Robson and her colleagues attach a blindfold and muzzle, then record the animal’s sex, age and physical condition. The process takes less than five minutes.

Robson expressed doubts about the long-term effectiveness of lethal removal programs, although she recognizes that lethal methods may be necessary.

“The lethal management option — particularly for population control, or to address nuisance activities on a large-scale level — has been shown to be very ineffective,” she says, calling it a “short-term solution to a long-term problem.”

She states that under an untargeted large-scale coyote removal program, “You’re creating a resource vacancy for more coyotes to fill in and take advantage of, and you’re not really addressing the cause of why that animal became a problem in the first place. Using the tagging program allows wildlife managers to identify a problem animal and remove it if its behavior cannot be modified



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**UW Urban Canid Project researchers David Drake, left, and Marcus Mueller check the area of a sprung cable restraint near the Lakeshore Nature Preserve on the UW-Madison campus.**

through efforts such as hazing programs and public education. This could allow for the option to do targeted lethal removal.”

**See a coyote? Report it online**

The Milwaukee County plan has a public reporting system that complements the educational outreach and tagging efforts. Milwaukee County Coyote Watch Project’s web page (see sidebar) — operational since December 2015 — has been embraced by the public. As of June 9, 2016, 262 observations were submitted by 167 users.

“If an individual encounters a coyote, tagged or not, they can go to the reporting page and submit their observation,” Robson says. “The page prompts a series of questions aimed at gauging the level of habituation in the animal they observed. How close was it to you? Did it act aggressively? If that particular animal is tagged it will enable us to create a profile for that animal should it keep encountering humans. The page is also a tool to aid in determining where and when to implement targeted educational outreach within communities experiencing heightened coyote activity.”

In addition to identifying animal behavior, it provides the opportunity to identify unique behaviors observed by the public with an animal, and it also gives Robson and her colleagues a potential avenue to engage in targeted lethal removal if it’s deemed necessary.

The majority of reports posted on the web page have come from people who see coyotes while out walking, with minimal interaction between the coyote and human. If a pet is attacked the information is kept until staff can follow up. Once completed, the information is put into an incident report.

**UW-Madison Urban Canid project**

Southeast Wisconsin is not alone in deal-

ing with urban coyotes. Coyote sightings have been reported in Madison neighborhoods and on the western part of the UW-Madison campus, in addition to red foxes living under a campus building. David Drake heads coyote research at UW-Madison and launched the UW Urban Canid Project in 2014. He was one of the coyote experts who took part in the DNR’s online coyote chat.

“We are trapping, collecting health data, ear tagging and radio collaring coyotes, but do not remove the coyotes from the area where we trap them. Instead, we release the trapped animal at the exact location where we trapped it,” Drake said during the chat.

Assisting Drake is Marcus Mueller, a graduate student who came on board in 2015. Mueller says the project has three main goals: explore the urban ecology of red foxes and coyotes living in urban areas, study the animals’ diseases and potential for disease transmission to domestic canids, and educate the public.

“While the potential for trap-tag-track programs is a valued and important

component to this plan, proactive monitoring (via iNaturalist), public education and hazing are the most critical elements of this plan. If done successfully, minimal effort will be needed for trap-tag-track programs. We’re trying to get the public involved with research, basically to increase awareness for urban foxes and coyotes to better promote a positive coexistence between people and canids in urban areas,” he says.

Coyotes became part of the research project because of sightings in the Lakeshore Nature Preserve, the largest natural area on the UW-Madison campus.

“People walking their dogs, hiking or birdwatching would see the coyotes,” Mueller says. “Because of public interest and concerns, the research project was initiated to better understand how the animals were living in an urban area, specifically Madison.”

Mueller says there have been coyote attacks on dogs in Dane County.

“We’re trying to learn more about these animals so we can be proactive, so we can head off any potential conflicts,” he adds.

Mueller understands the public’s fear of coyotes, but danger to humans really isn’t much of a threat.

“What we want to show people through our project and research from other organizations around the country is that the research suggests these incidents make up a very tiny minority of urban coyote behavior,” Mueller says. “There are over 2,000 coyotes in the Chicago area, but the aggressive encounters are very, very few and far between.”

*Marcus Smith is a DNR public affairs manager stationed in Milwaukee.*



**URBAN COYOTE RESOURCE INFORMATION**

Interested in learning more about coyotes? Please visit the following websites:

- Cook County Urban Coyote Research Project: [urbancoyoteresearch.com](http://urbancoyoteresearch.com)
- Milwaukee County Coyote Watch page (also use to report coyote sightings or encounters): [www.inaturalist.org/projects/milwaukee-county-coyote-watch](http://www.inaturalist.org/projects/milwaukee-county-coyote-watch)
- UW Urban Canid Project: [www.uurbancanidproject.weebly.com](http://www.uurbancanidproject.weebly.com)
  - [www.facebook.com/uurbancanidproject](http://www.facebook.com/uurbancanidproject)
  - [www.inaturalist.org/projects/uw-urban-canid-project](http://www.inaturalist.org/projects/uw-urban-canid-project)
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources urban wildlife web page: [dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/urban.html](http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/urban.html)
- Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources coyote web page: [dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/urbancoyote.html](http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/wildlifehabitat/urbancoyote.html)