

2-2-13 Loving it Wild, Leave it Wild

Despite the recent coyote sightings by my neighbors and my sightings of their scat while out on walks in the woods, I still was not prepared for seeing these beautiful creatures with my own eyes. I was standing at the kitchen sink, looking at the front porch bird feeder, as I often do, when I spotted some movement in the woods.

The first coyote, mostly tan, delicately walking along the land ridge, tail down, was followed by a second coyote, more grey. Now I understood why one neighbor had described it as tan and another disagreed, saying, no, it was more grey and speckled. They were both right.

So, it appears that a pair of coyotes has been establishing its territory in my neck of the woods. And I'm okay with that. I am thankful for the moment of beauty and the feeling of wonder when I have that opportunity. I am thankful that nature and humans can live aside one another. Of course, people used to be part of nature. Now, at least for most of us, we just visit and watch from the safety of our homes.

To tell the truth, I have more concerns about the abundance of white tailed deer happily living in the suburbs. They are gorgeous animals, but every time I see a pile of their droppings or a flattened area where they recently slept, all I can think is, "Oh, great, more ticks and more disease! Go away!"

At least the coyotes will help to keep the mouse populations down, and the white footed mice also play a role in Lyme disease. While cats are carnivores, coyotes, like dogs and humans, are omnivores; they will eat just about anything. They will provide some cleaning up by eating road kill. They will provide some control of nuisance animals such as woodchucks. (Ask a gardener about woodchucks.) Coyotes, along with raccoons, will happily eat some garbage, also. And that's where we come in and can make a difference.

We don't have to do anything to attract coyotes; they are everywhere in Massachusetts, except for the islands, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. Give them time; they can swim!

We can take steps to lessen their interest in our yard, though. As a health agent who receives many calls about nuisance animals and the accumulation of rubbish and garbage, I can tell you that it is not a good idea to leave garbage outdoors. It attracts all kinds of unwanted wildlife including stray cats, rats, mice, raccoons and coyotes. Once they get accustomed to easy meals, they can become habituated to those circumstances and settle right in, enjoying all the comforts of what is then seen as their territory; not yours. This would be one circumstance where mankind's lazy habits can alter the behavior of the "wild" animal, increasing the chances of seeing aggression and territorial behaviors toward humans.

If the human's yard has a steady supply of food, the coyote (or the skunk or raccoon) might also look around for a place to live near the food supply. That makes sense; wouldn't

you? This is why it is important to keep areas under porches and sheds closed off and vents to crawl spaces in good repair. For other animals, such as squirrels and raccoons, the same goes for vent covers to attic spaces. Why nest in a cold tree when you can have soft insulation, some heat and be out of the wind and snow?

Even if you take all the precautions of saying “Not Welcome”, there is another time and way you might see aggressive, territorial behaviors from coyotes. No one wants to see this; we might as well understand it, though. When another food supply becomes abundant, in one area, the coyote may protect that area while the supply lasts. This is what happens with turtle eggs. Just like Ol’ Yeller, they love eggs! If you live near a wetland, you may not even be aware that turtles have dug holes in your yard and laid eggs, but the coyotes know.

While they are busy establishing territories and mating just now, later in the spring they will be busy feeding their pups and a ready supply of turtle eggs will keep them well nourished. If you observe dug up holes in your yard, along with frequent coyote sightings, in late spring, you probably are witnessing a turtle egg feast. Leave them all alone for about a month and the territorial behaviors should subside.

Aim for a balance between keeping yourself, your family and your pets safe while also enjoying the sight of wild animals and the wonder of watching them.

You can call Mass Fisheries and Wildlife at 508 389 6300 for advice on territorial behaviors. If the wild animal displays signs of aggression or sickness such as a staggering gait or unusual behaviors such as approaching humans, call your local Police Department’s Animal Control Officer and Board of Health for a decision and actions on rabid animals. Just keep in mind, that a wild animal in your yard does not constitute a legal reason for moving it or killing it. Sometimes we have to leave it alone and let it be wild.

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