

## The New Big Bad Wolf...

Coyotes have become our modern big bad wolf. With no real wolves in this part of the country, we need something to fill the void. Check the local news in recent years and there it is. Coyotes are coming to town. Coyotes are howling...in the dark. People are scared and spooked. These same media outlets that report far more frequently on dogs attacking people have presented coyotes as something to be feared.

But there's good news. Coyotes are not big bad wolves. (Even big bad wolves aren't as bad as myth has us believe.) They are not out stalking people. They are not coming to town en masse to stalk your kids and eat your cats or vice versa.

Yes, coyotes do at times get cats; it is one of the risks of letting cats outdoors. Neighborhood free roaming dogs are a bigger threat to cats. I've had several cats for a number of years. I know of none of my cats taken by coyotes (doesn't mean it hasn't happened), but I know for a fact that one of my cats was killed by two dogs.

As for children, practically every day a child is attacked by dogs. Coyote attacks are much less frequent, though there have been some California cases that have attracted attention in recent years. More recently, an attack in Nova Scotia resulted in the death of a hiker.

Most coyote attacks occur when the animal is defending a food source and/or has become too familiar with people. There is one known case of a death in the U.S. due to coyote attack.

I often walk in the woods before daylight, and have never encountered a coyote. I use the same precautions I would if I was in a neighborhood where I knew dogs could be an issue. In fact, packs of neighborhood dogs frequently come through our place. I just take my walking stick, cell phone and my dogs with me.

Scientific evidence does prove what really is common sense: there are far more dog attacks on humans. The CDC says more than 4.7 million people yearly in this country.

As for cows and other livestock, the

U S D A states that coyotes are the biggest culprits, involved in more than 50 percent of attacks. "Guard dogs and donkeys have been effective as coyotes determents" in ad-

dition to other measures, according to the Alabama Wildlife Federation's(AWF) Managing Wildlife.

One day a few years ago, I looked out my kitchen window, to see the biggest coyote I've ever seen. This coyote looked at least as big as Adirondack coyotes, which are some of the biggest in North America, with males averaging 40 lbs. The AWF states that the average male is 33 lbs., but that they can get up to 46 lbs. in Alabama.

The adaptability of the coyote makes it a fun study subject. They've gone from being rare or nonexistent east of the Mississippi prior to 1900, to being at the top of the food chain in many areas from Florida to Canada. They can live in cities or rural areas and eat a diet consisting of anything from fruit to insects to small mammals and carrion. Dr Adrian Forsyth, a Smithsonian researcher, states that "they have been seen fishing" by wading into the water and "plunging their heads below the surface." Coyotes have even populated some islands because they are adept swimmers.

Though coyotes are usually loners, they can be pack animals if the conditions are right. Hunting in tandem is not uncommon. While 1st year coyotes normally disperse from the family



unit from August – December (with a 70% mortality rate), sometimes they will stay on for a few more years. In areas where wolf predation is a concern, this behavior seems more common.

Here in Alabama, coyotes will breed in February and early March and give birth from late March to May. The male will help care for the pups, as sometimes will other coyotes.

The Narragansett Bay Coyote Study has been tracking coyotes packs on the island for a few years. They have updates on the study and on individual coyotes. Also, you can use Google Earth to view their coyote mapper, which utilizes GPS to track individual coyotes.

**The website is:**  
<http://www.theconservationagency.org/coyote.htm>

**Also, National Geographic has good information for children:**  
<http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/Animals/CreatureFeature/Coyote>

*-Anita Smith, Editor*

© 2009