

The Coyotes Among Us

Friend or Foe, Coyotes (and Perhaps Their Cousin, the Coywolf) are Here to Stay

By Chay D. Baxley

Something is lurking in our woods, preferring to operate under a veil of seclusion until unattended garbage cans, birdfeeders, household cats and even free-roaming dogs lure it from its solitude. A little incentive is all it needs.

A quick learner, this stealthy creature adapts readily to even the most unfriendly environments — sleepy neighborhoods, moonlit parking lots, city streets and back alleys are all to its liking.

No need to alarm the authorities — they already know who it is. Its yipping call cannot be denied.

Coyotes are here.

Sightings of their kind have increased statewide, and Tallahassee is no exception. Block parties throughout the city and county are abuzz with reports of coyotes being observed: pups in the middle of the road in Bradfordville and SummerBrooke, running across an open field in the Vineyards, an adult near Killlearn Center Boulevard. At noon, at night, at dusk and in the afternoon. These days, SouthWood, Killlearn, Piney Z and Golden Eagle residents are just as likely to spot one as those who live in remote country dwellings.

Present in our region since the 1960s, it's believed hunters may have brought coyotes into the state as prey to help hone the skills of hunting dogs. But with no natural predators, their numbers quickly flourished.

Catherine Kennedy, a Wildlife Assistance Biologist for Florida Fish and Wildlife's Northwest Region, received three phone calls in 2013 for nuisance coyotes in Leon County. Bill Crowder, a Greenville-based professional trapper, also received three calls. In rural areas surrounding Tallahassee, those numbers were much higher.

Both Kennedy and Crowder are experts in their field, both have a sincere passion for wildlife and both are all too aware of the recent surge in coyote sightings.

Yet neither is all that concerned. By and large, they agree that, at least for the most part, these wild canines won't harm us. But the urban coyote, or the coyote whose territory intersects with suburbia and metropolitan areas, poses a challenge to their cause.

"He's an entrepreneur," emphasized trapper Crowder. "I can tell you that."

Crowder has been professionally trapping for the last 45 years. His trapping territory ranges from Tallahassee east to Jacksonville and south to Gainesville. Many of the area's leading plantations use his services, as well as a retired Florida State University president. One of only eight certified trappers in the state (one of the others is his beloved wife, Rosa) and the former president of the Florida Trappers Association, at age 73 Crowder's credentials are impeccable. All of his trapping and euthanization



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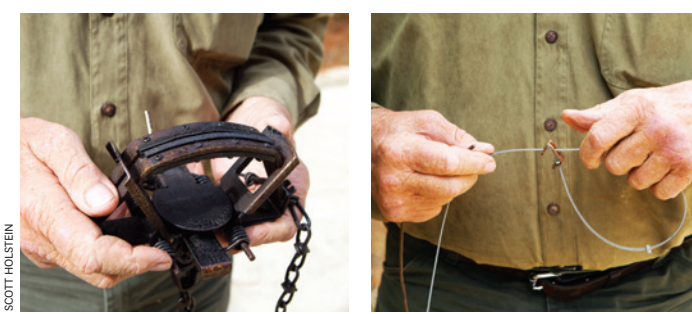
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techniques are within the confines of the law and, he says, should only be used as a last resort.

Still, business isn't hurting. The price of Crowder's services may vary depending on the gravity of the project, but his mission always takes two to three weeks to complete. Before each stakeout Crowder boils his equipment, sterilizing it to ensure any trace of human scent is gone. After he scours the land for any signs of a lingering coyote population (tracks, scat or dig marks are all clear indicators) he sets up a combination of snares, which operate by a noose-like apparatus, and rubber-jawed steel traps.

Then, he waits. "They're a very smart animal," admired Crowder.

One of his clients is a Madison County seed cleaning plant. The very nature of that business can attract vermin like mice and rats. To keep the chaos at bay, the owners brought in cats to establish a pecking order.

But soon, the neighborhood coyotes were at the top of the food chain.

"He had 60 cats there," explained Crowder. "In two years time, he's down to one."

Crowder also shares a photograph of a "pack" of three coyotes he killed, alongside a dead cow that they had taken down while she was giving birth, devouring her calf entirely and the majority of the cow's hindquarters. Crowder believes two other pack members may have evaded his traps.

FWC experts said coyotes don't generally hunt in packs and the largest ever recorded in Florida was 39 pounds. But Crowder swears he's seen them surpass 40, 50, even 60 pounds.

Tracker Bill Crowder (right) identifies evidence of a coyote and presents two types of legal trapping techniques — the rubber jawed steel trap (left) and snare (right).



Outdoor enthusiasts up north (way, way up north, in Toronto) have been faced with a similar problem in recent years, when the Canadian coyote population around Ontario's Algonquin Park began getting bolder and, well, bigger.

PBS aired a special in January entitled "Meet The Coywolf" that addressed the matter head on.

And, yes, a "coywolf" is exactly what it sounds like.

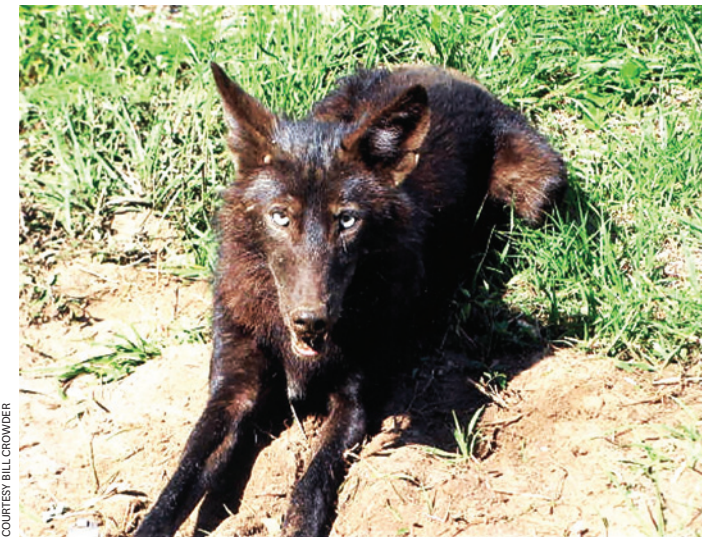
"The coywolf, a mixture of western coyote and eastern wolf, is a remarkable new hybrid carnivore that is taking over territories once roamed by wolves and slipping unnoticed into our cities," PBS's website reads. "Its appearance is very recent — within the last 90 years — in evolutionary terms, a blip in time."

That can't be happening here though... this is Florida. The eastern wolf, or the gray wolf as it's more commonly known, isn't indigenous to the Sunshine State, and the last free roaming wild red wolf was seen in this region in the 1920s.

Try telling that to believers.

"You've hit the nail on the head," enthused Crowder, when an onlooker mentioned that the animals in his photographs looked decidedly wolf-like. "They have interbred with the eastern gray wolf. They say they haven't, but where does the black (fur) come from?"

Not only is his a compelling question, it's one science does not have a readily available answer to, though research is being conducted



COURTESY BILL CROWDER

through a cooperative genetics study between Georgia's Berry College and Princeton University in the hopes of solving this mystery. The FWC is providing tissue samples from the Florida "coyote" population to aid their research.

Until those findings are released, the FWC maintains all evidence so far regarding a possible hybridization in Florida has been circumstantial or hearsay.

As for our very real coyote problem, both parties to of this debate agree that, generally, coyotes are more afraid of humans than the other way around. For an opportunistic carnivore, humans (and human-guarded companion animals) are simply not worth the hassle.

"Really, he's a wuss," joked Crowder. "But he's also a very good killer."

According to the FWC, there were only 159 coyote attacks in the United States and Canada from 1960–2006, and only two of those were fatal. To put that into perspective, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention says about 4.5 million people are bitten by dogs each year in the United States alone, and one in every five of those attacks requires medical attention.

To avoid becoming a statistic, FWC's Kennedy said residents should address this intelligent apex predator the same way it regards us — with a cautious dose of respect and wariness.

"The mere presence of a coyote doesn't mean there's a threat," reassured Kennedy. "They do roam during the day. Typically they're most active at dawn and dusk, they're what's called crepuscular. The fact that they're out during the day doesn't mean they're sick. It basically just means that they're out looking for food."

A sighting of a coyote in and of itself doesn't warrant action from authorities. Only the threat of physical harm to a person or person's property, including household pets and livestock, will require action. It should also be noted that there is no coyote

The existence of a thriving coywolf population in Northwest Florida may seem farfetched to some, but the photographic evidence is compelling. Experts at the FWC argue this image may actually be coydog (a hybrid between a domestic dog and coyote) but others remain unsure.

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“relocation program,” as their population numbers put them well above any sort of endangered species threshold. Once trapped, coyotes are killed.

To avoid excessive bloodshed, Kennedy cautioned on feeding in to unwarranted hysteria, stating that even uninvited species can serve a purpose.

“Those are kind of the bad things about coyotes, but there are some good things,” admitted Kennedy. “Coyotes can control other populations of what people would consider to be nuisance wildlife. They keep raccoon populations in check, for example.”

Still, some officials in our area aren’t willing to take any risks. The folks over at Tallahassee Regional Airport, for example, have taken serious measures to ensure their runways are free from wildlife — particularly *Canis latrans*.

According to Jim Durwin, superintendent of airport operations, in the late 1990s employees started noticing coyote activity. Bordered by the Apalachicola National Forest’s 632,890 acres of pristine woodland, the issue quickly elevated. By the early 2000s, the City of Tallahassee had a problem on its hands.

Luckily, the city was able to secure federal funding to address the issue. In 2006, a 10-foot high, seven-mile perimeter fence was erected. At its base, airport workers poured two feet of solid concrete. Designed to deter human intruders, it is also impenetrable to expert digging paws.



COURTESY BILL CHROWDER

Generally, coyotes are described as timid, scrawny wild canines with an instinctual aversion to human contact.

Meet the Coyote

Scientific name: *Canis latrans*

Height: 23–25 inches

Weight: 20–35 pounds

Diet: an opportunistic carnivore, coyotes will eat any accessible prey

Habitat: documented in all 67 Florida counties

“We’ve combined the security and wildlife issue,” explained Durwin. “We got a new perimeter fence around the airport. You can see where [the coyotes have] tried to dig and they get to the concrete slab and just give up and go somewhere else. That’s been huge for us, and it’s really addressed the vast, vast majority of our issues.”

The airport’s solution follows some of the guiding principals standard for avoiding wildlife confrontation: removing attractants, eliminating a comfortable environment and diligent upkeep. For Durwin, the resulting effects are something he is both personally and professionally proud of.

“A lot of us here on staff love the outdoors, and we love animals,” said Durwin. “Nobody wants to have to do anything negative with animals that might be coming inside [our airfield]. It’s just great, because it keeps them out in their habitat and it keeps the airfield safe, free from damage and injuries.” ■

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