

A photograph of a winter landscape. The foreground is a smooth, snow-covered field. In the middle ground, there is a wooden post with barbed wire wrapped around it. Behind the post, there are several bare, thin trees and shrubs. The background is a hazy, snow-covered field under a clear blue sky.

Co-existing with **COYOTES**

By Chris Mills ■ Photos by Ann Brokelman except where noted

A FEW YEARS AGO, a coyote found its way into my home town of Fort Erie south of the Niagara Escarpment. It must have approved of the local woods because my wife would spot it watching her walk our dogs in the early dawn hours.

Canada's aboriginals revere the coyote as the species that guided humankind when we arrived thousands of years ago. And I'd always found the idea of living cheek to jowl with wild animals appealing. What better way to prove we're not at odds with nature? ►



The health of coyotes indicates
the health of an ecosystem.
Coyotes keep land in balance.



▲ Lesley Sampson of Coyote Watch Canada advocates for living harmoniously with coyotes. PHOTO BY CHRIS MILLS



▲ The mother of the young coyotes opposite, keeping watch at a distance.

I'm sure many in town shared that sentiment, but there was no fighting the horror stories about marauding coyotes that had ripped their dogs from someone's arms. There seem to be two attitudes to coyotes: of hunters who can kill coyotes year round without a special licence, and wildlife supporters who believe coyotes aren't the ravenous predators of myth and cartoon.

One advocate for co-existence with nature is Lesley Sampson whose passion for wildlife conservation drove her to co-found Coyote Watch Canada in 2008.

"Coyotes are a keystone species," says Sampson, who switched from studying

wolves to studying coyotes for her university thesis 16 years ago. Along with changes to the landscape through agriculture, wolves were hunted and harassed out of existence in southern Ontario more than 100 years ago, which gave eastern coyotes, a unique hybrid between the western coyote and eastern wolf, the territory to migrate through the region, into eastern Canada and the southern U.S.

A keystone species is a class of animals that tells how an ecosystem is doing. Sampson says the presence and behaviour of coyotes indicates whether we've got the balance of nature right.

"They're Mother Nature's cleanup crew. They keep meso [mid-size] predators down, they feed on carrion, they control the rodent population, and they've the ability to work the land and keep it healthy."

With that knowledge, Coyote Watch Canada lays out four cornerstones to co-existing with coyotes: education, prevention, investigation and enforcement.

Mismanagement

"First of all, government agencies, residents, school officials, parents and children need to learn about coyotes," says Sampson. "They need to understand who they are, how they're connected, what

their behaviour means going from season to season. We can Google horror stories and I can poke holes in every one of them because they're not based in fact. They're supporting someone else's lust to kill." According to Sampson, ignorance, myths, and farmers and hunters who can make money from claiming coyote kills of livestock, contribute to the negative view of coyotes.

"It's open season on coyotes who can be killed 365 days a year anytime anywhere in Ontario (except for certain locales around Algonquin Park)," says Sampson.

Continued on page 46 ►



◀ Adult and infant coyotes are rarely seen together. The pups or kits will play while their parents hide nearby, standing guard.



A young coyote will explore its world but at any sign of danger, will quickly hide. ▶



“Coyotes are a keystone species. They keep meso [mid-size] predators down, they feed on carrion, they control the rodent population, and they’ve the ability to work the land and keep it healthy.”

◀ If you encounter a coyote, you can frighten it away by shaking a can of pebbles or popping open an umbrella at it, or blowing a whistle or stomping your feet, shouting and waving your arms. Shaker cans are available from Coyote Watch Canada. PHOTO BY CHRIS MILLS



◀ A pair of coyotes. The colour of their fur helps camouflage them. They are more likely to see us than we are to see them.

“There’s no sound science to support that kind of mismanagement of a species.”

Sampson and her network of community advisers regularly speak before school classes, library groups and sport groups, to teach them how to co-exist with coyotes by keeping their communities clean, removing garbage, preventing baiting, and reporting coyote sightings.

Bird feeders that attract rodents can attract predators, too. If hawks are hanging around the neighborhood, coyotes may too. Feeding feral cats may sound humane, but it’s issuing an invitation to predators.

Compassionate Communities

“When we talk about leaving a legacy for a community, it really makes politicians sit up,” says Sampson. “Do we want to leave behind a legacy of death, ignorance, intolerance, cruelty, or a legacy of compassion, thoughtful interaction of wildlife, and appreciation? It’s all our responsibility, from the politicians to the wildlife officers to the citizens.”

One of the more proactive cities in Ontario would be Niagara Falls under Mayor Jim Diodati, one of whose initiatives was to become a “compassionate wildlife community” in 2010.

“It started for us from a problem seeking a solution,” says Diodati, a father of three in the north end of Niagara Falls. “We had coyotes ranging through our neighborhoods and school yards.”

The city contacted Coyote Watch Canada and had a presentation by Sampson.

“We reached out to the school principals, the school board, the NRP (Niagara

Regional Police), the NPC (Niagara Parks Commission), the MNR (Ministry of Natural Resources), the NPCA (Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority),” says Diodati. “It was an opportunity to educate and to promote the concept of sharing the city with wildlife.”

One consequence of that attempt to live in harmony with nature arose when a family of foxes moved into Diodati’s neighborhood where his children play and he walks his dog.

“People have come to me and said we’ve got to get rid of those foxes. I say what would you rather have? Skunks? Raccoons? (Coyotes) keep the neighborhood clean. Having coyotes in the community forced us to come to terms with the situation and learn to co-exist with nature,” says Diodati. —
“The community encourages it. Right now, we’re working on a trail system through the city where you can see wild turkeys running. It’s just fantastic.”

Sampson concurs the Niagara Escarpment is a natural habitat for coyotes, but that coyotes need that consistent message that their territory ends before it reaches our back yards.

“(Niagara Escarpment’s) got such amazing geography that really encourages and supports coyotes moving through it. They’re built to move, connected to their land, following old trails, making new ones, following hydro corridors.”

Sampson would like to see legislation in the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act for compassionate conservation. While the Ministry of Natural

Continued on page 48 ►

◀ Coyotes feed on carrion and control rodents. One day in a recent winter, to the editor of this magazine it seemed as if every tree suddenly had a squirrel rushing up it. Moments later, three coyotes were seen walking by.



▲ Coyotes are stealthy predators that have been appreciated and respected by First Nations.



▲ Coyotes are predators of such medium-sized animals as rabbits, mice, voles, squirrels and chipmunks, keeping down the rodent population.

Resources concurs that co-existence with coyotes is desirable, they also attest that farmers have the right to harass, capture or kill any coyote that threatens their livestock.

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture, however, wants to curtail any efforts to protect coyotes the way wolves are protected now. They also want the right to shoot firearms within municipalities to protect their livestock, something that's currently against the law.

Sampson believes coyotes deserve a scientific recount even though her respect for farmers' needs is undiminished.

"There are so many ways now to really successfully farm in harmony with wildlife," she declares. "I know a lot of farmers that have been living years and years that have never

lost one animal to a canid. Other things, but not a canid. For the scientists, researchers and biologists working within government agencies - it's time to take action against this flagrant disregard for a species. There's room for growth and for science to replace this attitude." **NEV**

Chris Mills is a Niagara-based writer, photographer and frequent contributor to Niagara Escarpment Views whose last article was "1814: Last, Bloodiest Year of the War," Summer 2014. He can be reached through chrismills.ca.

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How to Manage Coyotes

Coyote Watch Canada (CWC) recommends these tips for flourishing with coyotes.

- Never feed coyotes. We need to keep them wild and wary of people.
- Celebrate with children about local wildlife and teach them to respect wildlife from afar. Education is empowerment and removes fear-based misinformation.
- Clear around the barbecue.
- Never leave pets unattended, even in enclosed areas.
- Birdfeeders attract rats and mice that are food for predatory animals. Clear away any seed underneath the birdfeeder so it doesn't attract rodents.
- Seasonal changes influence coyote and wildlife behaviour. Canids are naturally curious and intelligent animals, the young of which are particularly curious about their new world. Never disturb a den.
- When on the trail carry out all food/garbage.
- Remove dog excrement, and keep domestic dogs leashed at all times.
- Carry a shaker can (available at CWC), an umbrella to pop, or a whistle in coyote territory.
- If you encounter a coyote: Stop on the trail, pick up small children and pets.
- Never turn your back on or run from a coyote, or any domestic dog for that matter.
- Stand still, then assertively shout and wave your arms above your head, stomp your feet and slowly back away.
- Report unauthorized feeding or harming of wildlife.

The CWC will also help cities become a Compassionate Wildlife Community, whereby non-lethal methods of controlling and living with wildlife takes place. Invite CWC to council meetings and they can help organize volunteers, animal services, municipal and regional services into a wildlife stewardship team. **For more information, visit www.coyotewatchcanada.com, or call 905-931-2610.**