

Opinion: Coyotes are just like hipsters

By Dan Flores

If you don't have a coyote story, give it time. You will.

The tawny, golden-eyed, sharp-nosed wild dog of the American deserts is now our backyard predator, everywhere from Miami to Seattle.

The stories pile up. During a heat wave, in broad daylight, a coyote strolls into a sandwich shop in Chicago and hops up on a freezer to cool off. Customers and staff flee for the street, where a shocked crowd peers through the windows as the coyote commandeers the store.

On the other side of the country, a California couple driving at freeway speeds plows through a pack of coyotes near Las Vegas. Hundreds of miles later, while unpacking the car near Nevada City, they discover a full-grown coyote snagged like a bug in the grill of the car. Their flying coyote ornament is fully alert, has one cut on a paw and another on its muzzle. Having hitchhiked to California, it is otherwise unhurt.

Such is the life of the American continent's native small wolf in the 21st century. Our task, because there is really no other option, is to understand them well enough to enjoy them as neighbors.

Exactly a century ago, Joseph Grinnell of the Society of American Mammalogists proposed we allow coyotes and wolves to live unmolested in the parks of the country's new National Park Service. Today rural coyotes outside the parks are still shot and trapped in staggering numbers. So coyotes came up with an even better refuge than the national parks: cities.

Los Angeles and Chicago are now home to thousands of coyotes, and Denver has at least a thousand in more than 125 packs. City-dwelling coyotes are living richer lives than their rural counterparts.

History is on the side of the urban coyote. For one thing, the species has a lot of experience as wild town dogs. Coyotes were living in Indian cities like the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan and the ceremonial Southwestern city now called Chaco Canyon a thousand years ago. They've been practicing in contemporary U.S. cities like Los Angeles for at least a century.

Some biologists argue that city life may be selecting for particular canid genetic strains: novelty-seeking, "super-genius" coyotes that can solve the riddles of being a predator in a modern metropolis.'

Compared to rural America, where the average lifespan of a coyote is just 2½ years, in cities the living is easy. Leash laws and municipal programs that curbed feral dog populations made city living even better for coyotes. Mice and rats, a coyote's most dependable prey, are numerous, as are geese and ducks and exotic fruiting plants of all kinds. In the city, nobody is shooting at you, trapping you, or poisoning you. So town coyotes are living to 12 or 13 years old. Because urban coyote territories are also resource-rich, metropolitan coyotes often get more than 60 percent of their pups to adulthood. In the countryside that figure is commonly less than 15 percent.

The most dangerous element of modern urban life for coyotes is crossing highways teeming with cars. No Aztec coyote had to master 70 mph traffic, but modern coyotes are figuring it out. Biologists have watched them in Chicago rush hour: crossing half a multilane interstate highway boiling with traffic, then sitting in the median until traffic thins enough for them to cross the other lanes. More than 60 percent of coyote deaths

still come under the wheels of cars in Chicago. But with more generations of city experience in carmageddon Los Angeles, coyotes have lowered that figure to about 40 percent.

A media out of its depth has tended to portray coyotes as invaders, as unnatural in cities, often describing them in language associated with criminals or gangs. But once we get over our shock at seeing them lope through our suburbs, and accept their presence in town as normal, there are far more reasons to celebrate coyotes than to fear them.

While coyotes will guard their pups against our dogs in the spring-summer denning season, careful studies indicate the vast majority of city coyotes are upstanding citizens. Coyotes are not foraging from dumpsters behind fast food restaurants, and they do not carry rabies. The prescription to co-existence is to keep them wild and wary of us, or at least thinking we're too weird to trust, and never habituating them to associating humans with handouts. Then we'll get to enjoy them as a remarkable flourish of the wild and the ancient, smack in the middle of modern life.

As the Aztecs discovered long ago, coyotes are a fact of urban existence. Resistance is futile.

Dan Flores is an environmental writer whose newest book is "Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History."