

Coyotes Having Come East, What Now?

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GERRY J. BRETT, the greens superintendent of the Mill River Country Club in Stratford, is never surprised by the woodchucks, rabbits, squirrels, wild turkeys and other small wildlife on the grounds around the club.

But he admits to having been a little startled this spring when he spotted a couple of coyotes prowling the wilder areas of the course early one morning. "People get a little nervous," Mr. Brett said.

Indeed they do. One coyote was shot in Meriden this year, not far from downtown. Last month, authorities were called in to deal with a coyote that attacked a kitten and is thought to have killed three sheep and a goat in Deep River.

Faced with an animal the size of a large dog and obviously feral, the state's mostly non-rural population does tend to raise alarms. Fear of rabies adds to the concern. According to the experts, however, there is little cause for concern and in fact much positive to be said for the new neighbors.

"They aren't hurting anything, and they are beautiful animals," Mr. Brett said.

Michael H. Griffin, the Stratford animal control officer, went a bit farther: "Actually, they're more beneficial than not, because they go after rodents and they are scavengers. The coyotes seem to be setting up a natural balance."

Mr. Griffin said six or eight of the animals have made their homes in Stratford, particularly near the town-owned Roosevelt Park, a large area of forest and field. He has received a few calls from people worried about the animals, but has explained that they pose little danger to humans.

Coyotes were first spotted in the northwest hills of Connecticut about 30 years ago, said Paul Rego, a wildlife biologist with the state's Department of Environmental Protection. Since then their numbers have steadily increased, to between 1,500 and 3,000 today, he said.

"The long-term trend, the last five or 10 years, is certainly on the increase," Mr. Rego said. "Coyotes encountering people in their back yards is becoming a real common occurrence." He estimated the population has increased more than 20 percent in the last 10 years as the coyotes move into new areas.

This year the department has received calls of coyotes being spotted in Fairfield County, which had been the last area of the state without them, probably because it is so urbanized in some areas, Mr. Rego said. And there are increasing reports of them being seen in even the state's most densely populated areas, including the outer reaches of Hartford and Stamford.

"We feel we're now at a point where we have about as many coyotes as we're going to have," Mr. Rego said. "They're found in just about every town. Even West Hartford residents have reported seeing coyotes."

In the wilder areas of the state, sightings are more common. David H. Carey of the Federal Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service office in Windsor said he has seen them on farm visits to Newtown, New Hartford and Torrington.

"Usually it's when the hay fields have just been mowed, and they're out there scouring the field for mice," Mr. Carey said.

At his family's farm in Woodbury, there have been two kills that appeared to be a coyote's work. (A dog, Mr. Carey explained, tears up a large animal's hindquarters as it runs behind it and tries to bring it down; a coyote rips out its throat.)

"We've lost two sheep that we're pretty sure were coyote kills, but that's over a seven-year period," Mr. Carey said. "And a guy I worked with had a new dog a coyote grabbed right out of his yard. They are killers, but most of the time they eat little stuff -- rabbits, mice and so forth.

The coyote is a pointy eared, a bushy tailed predator with a grizzled coat. In the East, they typically weigh 40 to 45 pounds -- their Western cousins run 5 to 10 pounds lighter. In Connecticut they're believed to be filling a niche left by the demise of the wolf and the puma that were here when the Colonists arrived.

A breeding pair of coyotes might have five pups in the spring, of which two to four are likely to survive to maturity. They quickly adapt to a variety of conditions, and are now known as far south as North Carolina and north into Canada.

Their usual prey is small game -- birds, mice, rabbits, squirrels and the like. They are also scavengers; when there is a report of them feeding on a deer carcass it's likely that the deer was carrion before it was found by the coyotes, animal experts say.

Mr. Rego said that as coyotes become more prevalent, so does misinformation about them.

Despite popular myth, coyotes are not known to breed with dogs because of differences in biology; even if they did, the offspring would be sterile.

The Meriden shooting occurred because people feared it might be rabid; in fact, it was not. Only one rabid coyote has been found in the state, probably because the strains present in Connecticut typically affect raccoons and bats.

"We're not going to have a bunch of rabid coyotes running all over the place, which should alleviate some of the fear of them," Mr. Griffin said.

Mr. Rego said another popular misconception is that the animals are dangerous to humans. "They represent only a very minuscule danger to people," Mr. Rego said. "We've not had a bona

fide attack on a human in Connecticut, or in New England that I'm aware of. They maintain a fear of humans and are generally not aggressive towards humans."

In fact, even out West, where coyotes have interacted with humans for much longer, there are few documented cases of attacks on humans. The last death attributed to them was a small child killed in Glendale, Calif., in 1981. Avoidance Is Usual

"Chances are you're never even going to see one of them," Mr. Griffin said. "If they have an area to run, they're going to be gone before you even see them."

John F. Filchak, deputy commissioner of the state's Department of Agriculture, said a number of farmers have reported losses to coyotes. He had his first run-in with the animals working on a ranch in Montana some years ago.

"During the calving season you'd run a flashlight across the fence line and there would be a bunch of eyes staring back at you," Mr. Filchak said. "They were out there, waiting for a chance to get a calf."

"They're similar to raccoons -- they've adapted very well to the environment, and they know where they can get their meals," Mr. Filchak said. The problem is that when they come into a state where there are more than 3.2 million people on just over 3 million acres, many of the control options used out West -- poison, trapping and shooting -- cannot be used.

"Out West, you might have 10,000 acres in your farm, and you're next to other farms that are that large or larger," Mr. Filchak said. "Here, your farm is going to be surrounded by non-farmers, for the most part, so many control measures aren't really an option. The problem with leghold traps and poison baits is that they don't discriminate. They are just as deadly to the neighbor's dog as they are to the coyote."

Mr. Rego said the coyote population might be nearing a stable level, because the animals are highly territorial. Each breeding pair sets a 15- to 20-square mile area for itself, and will chase off or kill another coyote that tries to come in. Natural reproductive controls will also limit the number of animals born when territory is limited.

"The take by hunters and trappers is really very low relative to their total population," Mr. Rego said. "More are killed by cars, actually."

He added that whatever their depredations, Connecticut probably could never rid itself of coyotes, because the animals are so wary of humans that controlling them is difficult, and even if 70 percent of their population is killed off, they will come back within a couple of years.

"For all practical purposes, they couldn't be eradicated," Mr. Rego said. "We just have to learn to live with them now that they're here."