HOME AND GARDEN COLUMN

COYOTES

While many large mammals in Florida are declining in numbers, one has moved into the state and is doing quite well, even in the face of rapid development. The coyote, resembling a medium size dog, is probably one of Florida's newest animals. Chances are, if you have not seen one in your neighborhood, you will in the next few years.

Coyotes were traditionally common predators out west. They were not found in Florida in the days of our early settlers but in recent years, have expanded their range and moved into Florida. They are now found throughout North America and have even expanded into South America. Coyotes have been documented in all but the most southern counties in Florida and UF/IFAS Extension Specialist, Dr. Marty Main says it is just a matter of time before they are found in the Keys.

Scientists say the population of many large mammals such as bears, manatees and Florida panthers are declining due to loss of habitat. The spaces that remain for them to live are shrinking and it is harder and harder for them to find adequate food and shelter to meet their specific needs for breeding and rearing young.

Coyotes, on the other hand, are well adapted to our urbanizing landscape. Competition from their enemies has been drastically reduced by hunting. Predators that would have killed coyotes include wolves, pumas like the Florida panther and grizzly bears. Since their natural predators are no longer an intense threat, coyote populations have increased.

Coyotes have also expanded because they have a high reproductive potential. They produce on average 6 pups in a litter once a year, but sometimes they may have as many as a dozen pups. The young leave the family and find new territory when they are nine to 10 months old and they can live for 5 or 6 years.

Unlike panthers and bears that prefer woodlands, coyotes do quite well in grasslands, pastures, woods or urban landscapes. Coyotes readily adapt to conditions found in close association with people. They will eat pet food left outdoors and scavenge in garbage cans or feed on road kill.

They have also been able to expand their range because they are not picky eaters. They will eat a variety of foods including rabbits, rodents, ground dwelling birds, small deer, wild piglets and armadillos. They eat fruits and have been found feeding in watermelon fields. They also eat smaller predators like foxes, bobcats and raccoons.

It should concern pet owners to know that coyotes will also eat cats and small dogs as that is the size of their natural prey.

Research in other states has shown that it is not possible to eliminate coyotes as a predator in the wild or in urban areas. They are wild animals that have learned to live with us. We can learn to live with them and reduce encounters with them by taking a few precautions.

The first important thing to do is really a don't. Don't feed the animals. Don't leave pet food outside and secure garbage cans so they cannot get into them or knock them over.

If coyotes are known to be in your area, be especially cautious with puppies and dogs when letting them outside in the morning or early evening. Stay with them while they are outside. If you have outdoor pets, be sure to keep them in secure cages.

Coyotes are not domestic animals so do not try to get near them. Don't try to touch them, catch them or tame them. They are generally very shy and secretive but will get used to being around humans and may be seen in the open in neighborhoods. They can carry rabies and other diseases such as parvo virus and can transmit them to your pets if they have not been vaccinated.

Don't let your pet cats outside to become food for coyotes. They are safer inside and they are less likely to get diseases that can be spread by wild animals and feral cats that run wild outside.
Since coyotes are relatively new in Florida, the University of Florida is conducting research on coyotes to study their impacts on populations of other animals and agricultural crops. Check out their website [HERE](http://www.osceola.ifas.ufl.edu) for more information.

Whether you are trying to discourage wildlife such as coyotes, or want to attract wildlife such as hummingbirds and butterflies, contact our UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office at 321-697-3000 or email me at efoe@osceola.org for more information.

Be sure to visit our UF/IFAS Extension Services Master Gardener volunteers at the Osceola County Fair February 9th through the 18. The fair is located at Osceola Heritage Park between Kissimmee and St. Cloud. They have lots of free publications and can help you with your gardening, landscape and wildlife questions. See you there!

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