

Coyotes

When the coyotes first came, I was upbeat. To once again have an efficient predator of both small and large game to fill a niche left vacant for well over a century—if perhaps a bit more timidly than the wolves and cougars that previously occupied that niche—would, I felt, be a welcome addition to the ecosystem. Their presence would make the Allegheny highlands where our farm is situated just a little wilder, a little less pastoral. We have a few bears and a handful of bobcats but the bears are inefficient and opportunistic predators, taking only a few newborn fawns or deer wounded by hunters, and the bobcats, almost never seen and only occasionally heard, almost exclusively hunt small animals. The first night that we were awakened by the coyotes barking and yipping and howling, I was, if not thrilled, at least pleased. Our dogs were not. Separated from their new neighbors by only a small fractional percentage of their DNA, they nonetheless have been determined coyote haters from that first moonlit night. Those few disparate nucleic acid sequences must hold powerful genetic memories of competition and perhaps predation.

Over the next few years, as still-rare sightings of the coyotes became more frequent and coming across piles of their scat on the logging roads and trails became commonplace, we began to notice the effects. First the rabbits, never as common as in the agricultural areas to the east, began to disappear. Where there would often be 8 or 10 young rabbits outside the kitchen window on a Spring morning, now—almost a decade since the coyotes arrived—we may see one or two in a year. Sightings of red foxes, which used to come every evening to hunt mice in the meadows, are extremely rare, again one or two in a year if at all. We occasionally find the dismembered carcasses of adult turkeys and their poult and the number of birds in an average flock has dropped dramatically. The grouse have virtually disappeared although the cyclical nature of the population makes it difficult to ascribe the decline to a single influence. There are no more feral cats, which is fine. Many of the box turtles that so often cross the woods paths in spring have tooth marks on the edges of their carapaces or plastrons, but I am not a forensic pathologist and am unable to differentiate between the tooth marks of a coyote and those of a bobcat let alone a domestic dog. Just last week, a nest of Canada goose hatchlings on the pond disappeared without a trace except for a few downy feathers and the slightly elongated tracks of a coyote in the mud on the pond bank.

A few years ago, the deer began to vanish. The Department of Natural Resources estimates that the deer population in the county is down 30% from its peak 5 years ago but they attribute the decline to increased harvest of antlerless deer, asserting that coyotes predominantly take fawns in the Spring and wounded deer in the Fall with little impact on numbers. They're wrong. The deer density, at least in our part of the county, has declined by more than 50%. Reported deer-vehicle collisions—a decent surrogate measure—are down more than 50%. Every pile of coyote shit that we find—all year long—has deer hair in it. We rarely go more than a week or two without finding a fresh carcass and, more often than not, they are mature deer with the long bones cracked for the marrow and the skulls pulled apart from the palate to get at the brain. Does with twin fawns, common just a few years ago, are rare and does with any fawns are becoming much less prevalent. The hostas and wildflowers and dogwoods that we once had to protect from the deer with garlic and cayenne haven't been touched in two years.

These are not the 25- or 30-pound song dogs of the desert west. These coyotes carry the genes of the timber wolves with which they occasionally bred during their migration across the northern tier. Fifty-pound males aren't rare and larger individuals have been documented. Two that size would outweigh the average wolf and are more than capable of bringing down a mature deer. Even large dogs are no longer completely safe. Coyotes have learned to send a young female out to entice pets from the back porch into the woods where they become a meal not a playmate. An adult folk singer on Cape Breton in Nova Scotia was killed by coyotes just a few years ago and children have been attacked in New Jersey and New England. As did the Crusades of the 11th through 13th centuries, the crusades against first the wolves in the east then the wolves and coyotes in the west have produced a more capable and resilient population. I don't want to carry that analogy too far. I'm not suggesting that these wild canids have shared memory (let alone a taste for revenge) but the genetic admixture and behavioral adaptation that have occurred over the past couple of centuries in response to human pressure certainly haven't had the desired effect.

The eastern coyote has done more than just fill a vacant niche—it has redefined and expanded on that niche. Wolves and cougars predated mostly on large mammals—deer, woodland bison and elk—and their population density mirrored the availability of those prey species. Coyotes, on the other hand, will eat virtually anything—deer, mice, squirrels, rabbits, cats, dogs, watermelons, corn, apples, garbage. Their more varied and non-specialized diet enables the coyote to expand more quickly and to maintain their numbers in a particular area even as the density of certain target prey species takes a nosedive. By virtue of that characteristic—obviously conferring an evolutionary advantage—coyote populations can be sustained at a level which is incompatible with maintenance of healthy populations of specific prey species and, more worrisome, not incompatible with their total collapse. Good for the coyotes; not good for the deer and rabbits.

So now what? It's a little late to pull the welcome mat inside and turn off the porch light. I'm certainly not opposed to active management. I've taken extra does to help maintain the herd at the carrying capacity of the woods. I've trapped and relocated woodchucks that insisted on digging burrows and having their young too near the house. I've added and removed fish from the pond. I catch and move copperheads from the raised stone flower beds. But the coyotes are smart. Sitting on the bank below the pond looking out over the lower meadow at dusk this spring, I managed to call one in within 25 yards with an electronic call but he or she came in behind me and was running at full tilt before I knew it was there or could raise my rifle. I won't use indiscriminate methods like leg hold traps or poison. Now that the vegetable gardens are planted, I don't really have time to pursue them diligently or effectively in the field. I wouldn't hesitate to shoot one from the upstairs window but our two dogs—nearly 150 pounds between them—do a pretty good job of keeping them away from the house. I've invited the neighbors to shoot as many as they can but that has resulted in only one animal removed. I've taken to carrying a handgun when I walk in the woods just in case the opportunity presents itself but it almost certainly won't and, in any event, my competency with a revolver is slightly below my competency with an atlatl so the act of carrying is largely symbolic and little more than a manifestation of my frustration.

The experts claim that 70% of the coyotes in a defined area need to be removed in order for the population to be reduced for more than a season. In an intact pack, only the alpha male and female breed, with the litter size determined by availability of food. Kill one or both of the breeding pair and the remainder of the adults will breed, exacerbating the problem. Reducing a coyote population is not a casual endeavor and, for once, I have no plan. I usually do have a plan in the works – sometimes well thought through, more often not – but this time I'm stumped. It's a little late for me to take up a new career in animal control and it's hard to rationalize a trade-off between growing vegetables or cutting firewood and chasing coyotes. I'm beginning to accept that there may be nothing more for me to do other than fret and grumble but the good news is that neither of those take much time or effort and I'm quite accomplished at both.