

Getting more 'wolflike' is the key to the future for coyotes

November 17 2017, by Patrick Whittle



In this 2008 photo provided by Josh Harrison, a coyote stands in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Mass. Coyotes have lived in the East since the 1930s, and recent genetic tests have shown they are actually a mixture of coyote, wolf and dog. And scientists say they might be getting genetically closer to wolves, helping them become better predators and thrive in urban areas including New York City and Cape Cod, Massachusetts, and the woods of Maine. (Josh Harrison via AP)

The future of the coyotes that roam forests, cities and suburbs from

Newfoundland to Virginia could hinge on the animals becoming the "wolves" of the East Coast. And humans better get used to them.

Coyotes have lived in the East since the 1930s, and recent genetic tests have shown they are actually a mixture of coyote, wolf and dog. That's why Eastern coyotes tend to be bigger than their Western cousins.

And they might be getting increasingly similar to wolves. The hybrid carnivore has expanded its territory and thrived over the past eight decades, and increasingly wolflike traits are making it a larger, more adaptable animal equipped for survival on the East Coast, scientists say. The growing wolflike characteristics mean humans must learn to better coexist with the adaptable predators, scientists and wildlife advocates said.

"We now have a novel, large canid to take over that new role," said Robert Crabtree, chief scientist of the Yellowstone Ecological Research Center. "The right size is going to be selected for us by biological evolution itself."

It's especially bad news for deer. In becoming more wolflike, the coyotes might become more effective predators, scientists said. And the genetic changes bode well for their ability to keep thriving in highly populated areas, including New York City and Cape Cod, Massachusetts, as well as the deer-rich woods of Maine and upstate New York.

And it could ultimately mean the coyotes start to play the role of top predator on the East Coast—one played by wolves long ago and no longer occupied by a single, dominant species.

The Eastern coyote is one of 19 subspecies of coyote, which are adaptable predators that live everywhere from the streets of Los Angeles to Florida swamps. The Eastern subspecies, which ranges as far west as

Ohio, is thought to have migrated to the Northeast some 80 years ago, taking over the range occupied by wolves and interbreeding with the larger animals.

They no longer overlap with wolves, which are long gone from the East save for the very rare red wolf, but they remain eight to 25 percent wolf genetically, said Roland Kays, a leading coyote biologist with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences.

They are also about eight to 11 percent dog due to past interbreeding with feral dogs, he said. The Eastern coyote remains capable of having pups with dogs, but it's not common in part because their breeding cycles don't neatly overlap.

Hybridization with wolves gave Eastern coyotes their size and weight, with Eastern coyotes averaging about 35 pounds and the Western subspecies averaging about 25 pounds.

Scientists see evidence that the wolf DNA is increasingly helping the Eastern coyotes survive, Kays said. And they might also be growing in number.

Current numbers of Eastern coyotes are hard to come by, state wildlife officials said. Kays has estimated there are likely more than a million.



In this 2016 photo provided by Josh Harrison, a coyote stares down wild turkeys in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Mass. Coyotes have lived in the East since the 1930s, and recent genetic tests have shown they are actually a mixture of coyote, wolf and dog. Scientists say they might be getting genetically closer to wolves, helping them become better predators and thrive in urban areas. (Josh Harrison via AP)

Reports about coyotes living in populated areas have accelerated in the past 10 years. Some towns in Massachusetts and Connecticut have called meetings to discuss safety concerns and more lethal trapping methods.

Suburbanites from New Hampshire to Maryland have complained that they snatch outdoor pet cats. Police in Lynn, Massachusetts, advised pet owners to avoid leaving pet food or small pets outside on Wednesday after a coyote was spotted in the Boston-area city of 90,000. And Manhattan dwellers have even reported seeing them in Central Park.

But fears that the animals could become a bigger threat, especially to people, are largely unfounded, said Camilla Fox, executive director of California-based Project Coyote. The animals are generally timid around humans.

There has been only one documented fatal Eastern coyote attack. Canadian singer Taylor Mitchell, 19, was mauled by coyotes in Nova Scotia in 2009.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has also reported that the percent of sheep and lambs killed by coyotes nationwide has actually tracked downward. Coyotes were responsible for nearly 59 percent of predator kills of sheep in 1994 and about 54 percent in 2014, the agency reported.

"If we leave them alone, they will self-regulate," Fox said.

The Eastern coyotes will have a greater chance of survival if they have access to large deer, said scientists. Abundant food, such as the Eastern whitetails, will give their offspring a better chance of survival, leading to healthy new generations of large, wolflike coyotes, Kays said.

"Are they going to get a little bigger? Maybe," he said.

The wolflike appearance of Eastern coyotes has motivated some people to dub them "coywolves." Eastern Coyote/Coywolf Research of Cape Cod, Massachusetts, wants them recognized as a separate species.

But Gerry Lavigne, a retired state wildlife biologist in Maine, says Eastern coyotes are not genetically distinct enough to constitute their own species, although they have wolf genes and are very adaptable. And Kays, the North Carolina [coyote](#) researcher, said so-called coywolves are "not a thing."

Numerous states issue extermination permits for coyotes or allow hunting of them. Some, including Maine and Vermont, allow recreational or sport hunting year round. Coyote hunter David Trahan, executive director of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, said he has observed "wolflike tendencies" in Eastern coyotes, such as hunting in packs.

State wildlife authorities are interested in finding what more wolflike traits will mean for the future of coyotes, said Wally Jakubas, mammal group leader for the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

"Whether these wolf genes are conferring some kind of advantage to these coyotes," Jakubas said. "That's where it really gets interesting."

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