

# Petition seeks to move captive coyote from forest preserve cage to animal sanctuary

January 11 2022, by Robert McCoppin

---



A coyote in Yosemite National Park, California, USA. Credit: Christopher Bruno/Wikipeida

On a recent morning with wind chills below zero, at a Cook County, Illinois, forest preserve, a coyote paced back and forth inside a cage, turning tight figures eights, peering out through the wires. With sharp teeth and quick movements, the animal looked ready to hunt. But animal experts agree, he probably can't survive on his own in the wild.

Before he opened his eyes as a pup, [forest](#) preserve officials said, this coyote was found in Tennessee by people who took him for an abandoned dog and brought him to a domestic animal shelter. He was kept there for three weeks, socialized and trained to be adopted like a pet.

When the operators realized he was a coyote, he was placed with an animal rehabilitator for several weeks, who concluded he'd been imprinted by humans. That means he had no fear of people, and was dependent on them for survival and socialization.

Eventually, the coyote was placed with the Forest Preserve District, spokesman Carl Vogel said. Since August 2018, he's been kept in a metal enclosure at the River Trail Nature Center in Northbrook, where Vogel said he gets expert care.

Some people are trying to change that. About 1,800 people signed a Change.org petition to move the coyote to a more [natural habitat](#) at an out-of-state animal sanctuary. The effort was led by animal lover Nicole Milan, who was disturbed to come across the caged coyote while on a hike late last year.

Other animals kept in captivity at the nature center, like a Swainson's hawk or a red-tailed hawk, have been physically injured, having lost an eye or a wing. The coyote, however, is physically healthy.

"I was flabbergasted," Milan said. "It's cruel and barbaric to keep a wild animal in solitude in such an unnatural, tiny cage. You wouldn't leave a dog alone like that in a cage."

Milan, who runs her own consulting company, calls the coyote Rocky, after the movie boxer. She asked forest preserve officials about its conditions, and was told the outdoor cage, roughly 10 by 22 feet, meets

U.S. Department of Agriculture standards, and that the coyote gets regular veterinary care. She offered to pay for a larger enclosure but was turned down.

Going further, Milan contacted the Wild Animal Sanctuary outside Keenesburg, Colorado, 30 miles northeast of Denver, which operates almost 800 acres of refuge land for captive wild animals. It is state and federally licensed, and is home to more than 550 large carnivores separated by species, including lions, tigers, bears and coyotes.

Most of the sanctuary's animals come from illegal roadside zoos or other private owners. The facility saved many of the big cats featured on the viral cable television documentary "Tiger King," which were transferred there on authority of the U.S. Department of Justice, founder and Executive Director Pat Craig said.

The sanctuary offered to take care of Rocky in large, outdoor, fenced-off enclosures, where after being evaluated and acclimated, he might live with other coyotes for socialization, pursue natural behaviors such as running and playing, and be fed.

Normally, according to the Urban Coyote Research Project, in which the Forest Preserve District participates, wild coyotes spend more than a quarter of their lives hunting and traveling, often in open areas such as prairies. They often live in packs and have a highly organized social system.

After being hunted and trapped to the point where they were considered wiped out from the area, along with wolves, in the 1800s, coyotes have since made a comeback, with thousands living in the metropolitan area.

Solitary coyotes travel large distances, covering up to 60 square miles across different towns and even states. In captivity, they typically live 13

to 15 years.

Milan sent the forest preserve a letter in mid-December proposing to move Rocky. She was told officials would get back to her by Jan. 22.

A friend, animal law attorney Cherie Travis, supported Milan's efforts, calling the coyote's captivity "cringeworthy." While the forest preserve nature center is 60 years old, advocates note that zoos and animal sanctuaries have evolved in recent decades to provide larger, more natural settings for the animals' welfare, and to build public appreciation for natural habitat.

Vogel, the district spokesman, said the coyote is well cared for, and serves an educational purpose for visitors, with feeding demonstrations and talks educating visitors on the native animals. Some visitors, including schoolchildren from Chicago, may never see a coyote in the wild.

"These ambassador animals play an important role, to teach the public what kind of animals live here, and how the public can support and protect native animals, so they're really doing something important," he said.

Milan has been reaching out to forest preserve board members for help and plans to attend the forest preserve board virtual meeting set for Tuesday, though Vogel said such situations typically are handled by staff members. Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle's office did not immediately respond to questions about what to do with the animal.

Milan was unconvinced by the district's educational claims, saying the cage only shows how to treat animals cruelly.

"It's only teaching children it's OK to hold wild animals captive," she

said.

The forest preserve board is expected to discuss the matter at its meeting Tuesday, after hearing comments from the public and a presentation from the forest preserve staff.

In Cook County, commissioners serve on both the county board and the forest preserve board. Preckwinkle's office issued a statement committing to protecting animals but supporting the status quo.

"All Forest Preserves ambassador animals serve an important role in helping connect Cook County residents to nature while having their needs for shelter, food and medical care met. This is the charge of the nature centers' staff and the wildlife experts responsible for these animals, and we are confident that every possible step is being taken to ensure the same for the coyote at River Trail Nature Center."

County board and forest preserve Commissioner Scott Britton, in whose district the nature center is located, said he will listen to all sides. He said the staff let him in the coyote's outer cage Thursday to see its attachment to humans. Naturalists indicated to him their thought that the animal would not be able to socialize with other coyotes, and that they'd prefer to keep it for educational purposes.

Britton said he might consider a compromise in which the district could seek funds to provide a better enclosure for the animal.

"I'm looking to do what's best for this coyote," he said. "We need to have a longer conversation and figure out what's best."

Commissioner Larry Suffredin called the situation a learning opportunity. He's nervous about transferring the animal out of state into a new setting but suggested having a third-party veterinarian look at the

[coyote](#) and suggest options.

"Whatever we advocate for, it has to solve a problem," he said.

The forest preserve mission is to protect open space, "with all of its associated wildlife, in a natural state for the education, pleasure and recreation of the public ..." It says nothing about keeping animals captive.

Brookfield Zoo, partially funded by the forest preserve and located on forest preserve land, has habitats built for wild animals, but zoos don't typically house common local [animals](#) like coyotes.

2022 Chicago Tribune.

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: Petition seeks to move captive coyote from forest preserve cage to animal sanctuary (2022, January 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-01-petition-captive-coyote-forest-cage.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--