

# There's a new hairy nuisance in Florida: Coyotes

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Seminole County has long been known as Florida's epicenter for bear encounters in residential neighborhoods. But now there's a new hairy beast in town: coyotes.

Over the past four years, the number of calls to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission from residents to report the skinny pointy-eared canines in the Seminole area has more than doubled, from 35 in 2020 to 75 last year.

That's among the largest jumps in [coyote](#) sightings in the greater Orlando region. And along with the sightings comes an increase in nuisance behavior, ranging from pesky—coyotes knocking over trash cans, raiding bird feeders, leaving dead animal carcasses in yards—to downright scary—attacking small pets, raiding backyard chicken coops, or even following humans on their nighttime walks.

"Just this morning my neighbor called to tell me that a couple of them were running around my yard in front of my house around 3 a.m.," said Jeff Small, a Sanford resident who often spots packs of two or three coyotes roaming his Loch Harbor neighborhood near the Mayfair Country Club.

It's a big change from two decades ago when Small, a retired business owner, moved into the subdivision and never saw a coyote. He figures the wild rabbits and feral cats that started populating in his neighborhood about three years ago are the attraction.

"All of a sudden, they were mostly wiped out," he said of the rabbits and cats after the coyotes moved into town. Biologists say this isn't necessarily a bad thing: By managing populations of insects, rodents and other [small animals](#), coyotes help keep the ecosystem in balance.

The sudden rise in coyote sightings in Seminole County is likely because of growing development pocketed by [wooded areas](#), allowing the animals to zip into a residential area, grab a meal, and then dash back into the forested spot, said Jayne Johnston, a senior wildlife biologist for the FWC.

That's why most of Seminole County's coyote sightings are occurring along the urban corridor east of Interstate 4, including in Sanford, Lake Mary, Longwood and Altamonte Springs.

"You've got those open spaces with forested areas that coyotes are able to utilize," she said. "So you can essentially have more coyotes in an urban landscape than you do in the wild. It's possible that's what's driving the calls."

In Orange County, the number of calls regarding the toothy predators to FWC also increased, from 135 in 2020 to 224 last year, a nearly 66% jump. In Osceola County, calls rose from 16 in 2020 to 28 last year, a 75% spike.

FWC does not have an estimated population count of the coyotes, and officials rely on calls to gauge where the animals are establishing territories.

But as calls of coyotes rise in Seminole's center east of I-4, the number of bear-related calls to FWC plunged by more than 30% over the past five years, according to numbers released last October.

That area west of I-4 was considered Florida's hot spot nearly a decade ago for humans meeting ursines.

In 2013 and 2014, three Seminole County women were attacked by bears. Wildlife officers would receive complaints almost daily of the large beasts tipping over trash cans, raiding garage refrigerators or simply plopping themselves in homeowners' yards west of I-4.

As recently as five years ago, Seminole ranked as the top county in Florida for human-bear interactions. Today, it ranks seventh, with 344 calls last year.

State wildlife officials credit Seminole's 2016 ordinance that mandates residents and businesses west of I-4—an area designated as the county's Urban Bear Management District—secure their trash cans, bring in pet food bowls, clean greasy barbecue grills and not hang bird feeders for the drop.

Now it may be time for residents to do the same for coyotes, county and state wildlife officials say.

Coyotes often move in small family packs and settle into a territory of about three square miles if they learn they can quickly and quietly snatch food—such as rabbits, small dogs, cats, trash, rodents and pet food left outside overnight.

"Their diet? If it's edible, they eat it," Johnston said. Feral "cat colonies are our biggest conflict with coyotes statewide."

Florida coyotes usually weigh under 30 pounds and are smaller than their cousins in western states.

They generally hunt between dusk and dawn, and then lie low during the day. It's extraordinarily rare for coyotes to attack humans in Florida, Johnston said.

"They will want to avoid you at all costs," she said. "So while you're sleeping in bed. They will be out and about in your neighborhood. And that provides their own safety and protection for them."

Female coyotes tend to have a litter of pups every year. That's why communities around the United States have struggled with trying to eradicate coyote populations. As long as a food source is present, a new pack of coyotes will move in to replace the old pack, Johnston said.

"We found that eradication is not an effective method," she said.  
"They're able to replace themselves very quickly."

The best way to deal with coyotes is to secure garbage, don't leave pet food or small pets outside overnight.

Because coyotes are timid, people can scare or haze the animals by waving their arms, yelling at them, making noise by banging a pot, or spraying water from a hose. Eventually, the animals will find a new place to live, according to the FWC.

Blaine Darrah, a resident of the gated Heathrow community tucked just east of several large state wildlife preservation areas, said that his community's security force occasionally encounters coyotes.

"When [coyotes] first showed up a few years ago, they did us a big favor by cleaning out a nest of [feral cats](#) that some neighbors were feeding," he said.

The state agency recently started holding workshops in neighborhoods and at homeowners association meetings in Seminole to educate residents about coyotes. FWC also will help neighborhoods put up signs warning of coyotes in the area.

Seminole Commissioner Amy Lockhart, a Sanford resident whose district has frequent coyote sightings, praised the state agency for educating the public about the toothy animals.

"We have so many new people moving here from out of the state that your proactive approach on communication is going to be critical for folks to understand [coyotes](#)," Lockhart said to Johnston at a recent county presentation.

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