Call of The Wild

By Anne Taylor Fleming
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Coyotes are neither friend nor foe. They’re cohabitants, pure and simple.

I was walking my dogs recently, an early evening stroll around my Westside neighborhood, when a woman standing in her driveway stopped me. “You need to be careful,” she said with concern. She was warning me not about a human threat but an animal one, specifically a coyote. She had encountered it a few days earlier while walking her large dog. In the fading light of dusk its wild eyes stared her down, and then the coyote literally gave chase, she says, as she hurried toward her house.

The animal finally peeled off in the face of her dog’s fierce barks and disappeared. I was, I admit, a tad incredulous. In my experience coyotes tend to be shy, not given to pursuit—certainly not of adults or big dogs. But in the next few days a couple more neighbors reported sightings. I don’t spook easily, but I did alter my routine, in part because in addition to my hefty Labrador I now have a scrappy ten-pound black rescue, a morsel for a predator—or so he seemed. I walked in the bright light of morning, both pups leashed firmly and held at my side. Was there reason to be scared? Was I overreacting? During my childhood here, I was aware of coyotes. I heard them before I ever saw one.

That was on a walk in the Santa Monica Mountains when I was a kid. I was stunned by the sound they made, a primal call so near my safe, suburban home. I had never heard such howling—plaintive and gripping and savage at the same time. Someone told me they were celebrating a kill, the lot of them presumably licking their bloody chops after devouring a rabbit or a rodent. I was reassured that they were not interested in eating me, the fear of a child who suddenly finds herself in a Laura Ingalls Wilder story. There was a thrill to that—discovering I was, like the girls in those books, part of the natural world, that while I lived in a huge, teeming city, I also lived in a place where wild things roamed.

A decade later I saw my first coyote, also in those mountains, just above a rise—a loner, much smaller
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than I expected, German shepherd-like and yet catlike, too, a 20-pound skulker with yellowish eyes, substantial stand-up ears, and a plume of a tail. After giving a sharp glance at us humans, it turned and sauntered off. I felt elated to have finally seen the source of the nighttime sounds. I love that we reside, in effect, in a theme park—one of those animal safari preserves but without the chain link. Within minutes of my house I can be on a hillside or a trail and spot a bobcat or hear the rustle of a snake. Outside the window at night I often detect the scratching of a raccoon.

I always felt more privileged than fearful about their presence. Over the years I have walked in the mountains with my various dogs—all sizable canines, I should add—and I was never trepidatious, though I took notice of the occasional stories of a coyote venturing into a backyard and snatching a small pet. Even the account in the early 1980s of a coyote mauling a toddler to death in Glendale, which sent shivers through all of us, seemed an isolated and bizarre event. Nothing of that magnitude has happened since, but it does appear as if the number of spooky coyote anecdotes is on the rise. A woman told me she saw one striding purposefully down Fairfax in the middle of the day. Is there a coyote population boom in play?

As it turns out, there are not more of them; there are more of us. At any given time roughly 4,000 to 7,000 coyotes occupy the county’s 4,084 square miles, a number that has remained fairly steady. The animals are apparently self-sustaining. If there are too many for the food supply, they just have smaller litters. As we expand our footprint onto wild land, building our houses where coyotes hunt, it’s no wonder they wander into our backyards. Closely related to wolves and dogs, they thrive in suburban and even urban settings. Resourceful by nature, they take advantage of our unsecured garbage and numerous water sources: dog bowls left out, unfenced pools. Normally they avoid people as they scrounge for small animals such as rabbits, rats, and mice. The unfortunate victims are cats, which we tend to let run freer than our dogs. Real trouble comes when well-meaning people start leaving out food for them. That’s an open invitation for the creatures to mix it up with humans.

I am struck by how we Angelenos relate to wild animals. We have a need to turn them into pets, to attempt to domesticate them (like leaving out that food) or to demonize them. Google the word coyote and you will see any number of pictures showing a menacing snarl, teeth bared. We gyrate between polar opposites: They are our coveted sidekicks or lethal beasts. In short, we look at them through our lens—through how they relate to us. Think of the people who buy lions or tigers or monkeys and try to live with them as pets (or in the case of the occasional chimpanzee, as a substitute child), and then are horrified when one of them turns fierce. Our boundaries are lousy, to use a bit of psychojargon.

When you talk to coyote experts, you don’t hear anything fuzzy. They don’t idolize the coyote, but they do respect it. They speak about the endurance of the animal despite all our attempts at eradication, about how it thrives throughout North America. Coyotes appear in the most surprising places. They roam Rock Creek Park in the heart of Washington, D.C., where I walk when I visit friends there, and have become fixtures in Chicago, where they slink through the alleyways. They are everywhere. The thing is, we need them. Coyotes eat the rodents that eat the birds—so if we decimate the coyotes, we lose the singing in the trees; we upset the delicate balance. We also lose an animal that is socially complex. Far from being the loners of myth, coyotes mate for life and live in packs like wolves. They have their loyalties; they have their bonds.

Rather than trying to seduce the coyote or, conversely, to annihilate it (the city has spent millions trying the latter through trapping and poisoning, to little avail), we should learn to coexist. That is both the sensible and the moral thing to do, and more Angelenos are getting on that wavelength. In Glendale recently, officials had planned to kill a bunch of coyotes that had moved into an abandoned house, but residents complained, and the idea was scrapped. The Calabasas city council has redirected funds from trapping efforts to education, teaching people how to respond to the animals, reminding them to keep small pets inside, lock up garbage, collect fruit that has fallen from trees. If you do come across a coyote on the street, don’t run; be loud and assertive, bang and stamp.

That’s what I shall do. I will be mindful, prepared to make a noisy fool of myself if need be. I will not stop going into the hills (though I will certainly leave the tiny rescue puppy at home). Being in nature is a deep and pleasurable part of my life. When I was near the Getty Center not long ago, I again heard the call of the coyote. What I now know is that the high, howling cry is not the celebration of a kill but a form of communication, a way of saying, “I am here and this is my territory, so stay away.”
I listened with new, informed ears, realizing I was privy to the language of some wild thing. How lucky for me.

**POSTSCRIPT: CALL OF THE WILD**

Open City columnist Anne Taylor Fleming on learning about coyotes and the local wildlife experts who help make Los Angeles a safe place for us and them.

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I am amazed that I have never written about coyotes. I have lived in Los Angeles all my life and have been aware of them since I was a child. They slithered around the edges of my imagination, with their wild howling and doglike appearance. I wasn’t exactly scared of them when I did see them, but they loomed large in the mind of a native girl because they were the only predators I saw up close from time to time or heard while on walks in the mountains. What a remarkable thing: to live in a vast, sprawling urban space and yet also be in such close proximity to something so wild and free. Of course there were those scary tales every now and again about one of these animals killing a domestic pet or trying to drag a small child out of a yard, stories that sent a shiver through the city. But until I write about something, I am never truly sure what I think.

Now that I have reckoned with the animal on paper in my Open City column, I am a bit in awe of these wily creatures that have outmaneuvered us humans at every turn. We have tried to poison and trap them, and yet here they are among us—as strong as ever. They have figured out a way to thrive in this great big teeming city, to live alongside us—and, in effect, to reeducate us, to try to teach us how to share this piece of the planet with them.

Much of that reeducation has fallen to a handful of dedicated coyote experts—to whom I, for one, am most grateful. I couldn’t have written about the animal without these experts’ fervor and guidance. As a journalist, I am often struck by the willingness of people to enlighten me, to bring me up to speed about this or that. So it was in this matter. Straight out of the box (courtesy of Google) I ran into a woman named Camilla Fox, as fluent and smart a coyote advocate as you can find. She is the executive director of Project Coyote and also a wildlife consultant with the Animal Welfare Institute. There is nothing touchy-feely about Ms. Fox. She is pragmatic, statistic based, and enthusiastically dry-eyed and yet impassioned about the animal she has made a big part of her life’s work. We must learn to live with them, she counsels, not try to wipe them out or befriend them. They are clearly here to stay, she says, so cohabitation is the goal.

Her sentiments are echoed by Gregory Randall, wildlife specialist for the City of Los Angeles Animal Services. These two, sometimes working together, are changing the way Angelenos are learning to live with these animals. During the last few years, there has been a real shift in the way we are now acting toward the coyotes in our midst. We aren’t trying to slaughter them; nor are we trying to seduce them with food. We are instead learning to do a mutually respectful dance, leaving them to roam as they will, while also understanding what we need to do to protect ourselves.

So a small revolution has taken place— or maybe not so small. I am inclined to think that how we treat our magical place and its magical creatures—with what courtesy and care—is a big reflection of the state of our morality, not to put too fancy a spin on things. Makes me feel better about my city, and that always makes me happy.