

San Francisco Chronicle

By Peter Fimrite

Published:
Sunday, December 2, 2016

From SFChronicle
<http://www.sfchronicle.com/science/article/Marin-County-neighborhood-coexists-with-coyotes-10690760.php>

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A pack of coyotes basks in the sun on a hillside near Monte Deignan's home in Larkspur, Calif. on Friday, Dec. 2, 2016. Photo: Paul Chinn, SF Chronicle

Marin County neighborhood coexists with coyotes

The three coyotes sleeping in the sun on a hillside behind a canopy of trees in Larkspur didn't even flinch when Monte Deignan stepped forward with his binoculars this past week to monitor the neighborhood pack.

A family of eight coyotes has taken up residence in the hills, where homeowners and their pets are now on alert, but the 62-year-old Larkspur planning commissioner is thrilled to see wildlife so close to home.

"This is the perfect urban wildlife habitat," Deignan said, scanning the virtually inaccessible brush-covered landscape hidden from the road by a line of houses. "You realize they are very benign and, hey, they are taking care of the rodent problem."

Yipping coyotes are a bedtime routine in virtually every city in Marin County, a veritable test case for a predator coexistence movement that is gaining

popularity throughout the Bay Area and much of Northern California.

Once rarely seen, coyotes are now prowling the foothills, trotting through people's backyards, boldly stalking prey and raising puppies outside living room windows. It is a situation that Bay Area communities, including San Francisco, are confronting as they receive reports of sightings from excited, and in some cases fearful, residents.

Larkspur and adjacent Corte Madera, in the shadow of Mount Tamalpais, are the latest to go gaga over the yowling fur-covered throngs.

ProjectCoyote.org

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PROMOTING COEXISTENCE
BETWEEN PEOPLE & WILDLIFE THROUGH
EDUCATION, SCIENCE & ADVOCACY

“This is the urban wildland interface, and they are a part of it,” Deignan said. “I think it’s great we can live in an area and all get along.”



“They hear the (emergency) sirens in the city and they say, ‘Oh, we can out-do that,’” Deignan said. “It just triggers them.”

The cacophony is little comfort to the owners of cats and small dogs that have been known to find themselves on coyote dinner menus. Many parents are also uneasy having the wild predators near their children.

In an attempt to ease tensions, Project Coyote, the Marin Humane Society and Marin County Parks are holding a community forum on the highly adaptive animals this month. The discussion will include tips on how to coexist with coyotes in general and the Larkspur family of eight in particular.

“They are seen a lot, giving people the impression the place is being overrun by coyotes when it is really just one family group,” said Camilla Fox, the executive director of Project Coyote, a national nonprofit group with headquarters in Larkspur. “Coyotes do not exceed the biological carrying capacity of an area, which is based on food and habitat availability.”

Public meetings have been held recently in Berkeley, San Francisco, Walnut Creek and other communities in the Bay Area where coyote sightings and confrontations have increased dramatically over the past few years. The numbers are growing, Fox said, because the animals are moving back into places where they were killed off decades ago.

There are as many as 700,000 coyotes in the state, according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, but nobody knows exactly how many are in the Bay Area. The crafty creatures crossed the Golden Gate Bridge in the early 2000s and have

since been reported in neighborhoods and parks throughout San Francisco, including Ingleside Terrace, Bernal Heights, Golden Gate Park, Stern Grove, Lake Merced, Mount Davidson and the Presidio.

Experts believe that the drought so reduced the populations of the primary prey of coyotes — mice, voles and rats — that they began looking for food in neighborhoods.

But the center of the song-dog expansion is Marin County. The carnivorous canines were ravaging sheep on west Marin ranches as far back as 1998. The practice back then was to kill them, but in 2000 the county formed the Marin Livestock and Wildlife Protection Program, which essentially used the money once paid to federal trappers to help ranchers build fences, corrals and lambing sheds, and purchase guard dogs.

The guard dogs in Marin have reduced predation and, according to the sheep ranchers, saved an industry that was struggling mightily in the 1990s just to remain viable.

The program has since morphed into a push for coexistence in urban areas like Mill Valley, Larkspur, Tiburon, San Rafael and Novato. Signs telling residents to “Be Coyote Aware” are popping up, and wildlife advocates like Fox are pushing hazing techniques and the necessity of keeping food and garbage away from the animals.

“Coexistence takes some education, which is what Project Coyote is trying to provide,” said Fox, who co-wrote the book “Coyotes in Our Midst.” “Unfortunately, the knee-jerk response in a lot of urban areas to the presence of coyotes is lethal removal, often

because homeowners associations have hired pest management services that are required by state law to either release them on site or euthanize them.”

Fox said that killing coyotes can actually cause their populations to increase by disturbing the pack hierarchy and, in turn, allowing more coyotes to reproduce. In a pack, only the alpha coyotes mate. When the alpha is killed, all the animals disperse and breed.

Federal trappers nevertheless kill close to 5,000 coyotes in California a year, according to Wildlife Services charts.

The animals are opportunistic and, given a chance, will sometimes kill and eat small dogs and cats, but Fox said they generally want nothing to do with humans. In virtually every instance of aggressive behavior, she said, the coyotes had either been fed by humans or were defending their dens during spring pup-rearing season.

On average, 20 people a year are killed by family dogs, but there has only been one documented case of a coyote killing a human in the United States — the 1981 death of a 3-year-old who was dragged away from her house in Los Angeles County. It was later alleged that people in the neighborhood had been feeding coyotes.

The hillside neighborhood in Larkspur is getting along just fine with the four-legged family, which shares the hillside with a large group of uncommonly bold deer.

“This is the urban wildland interface, and they are a part of it,” Deignan said. “I think it’s great we can live in an area and all get along.”