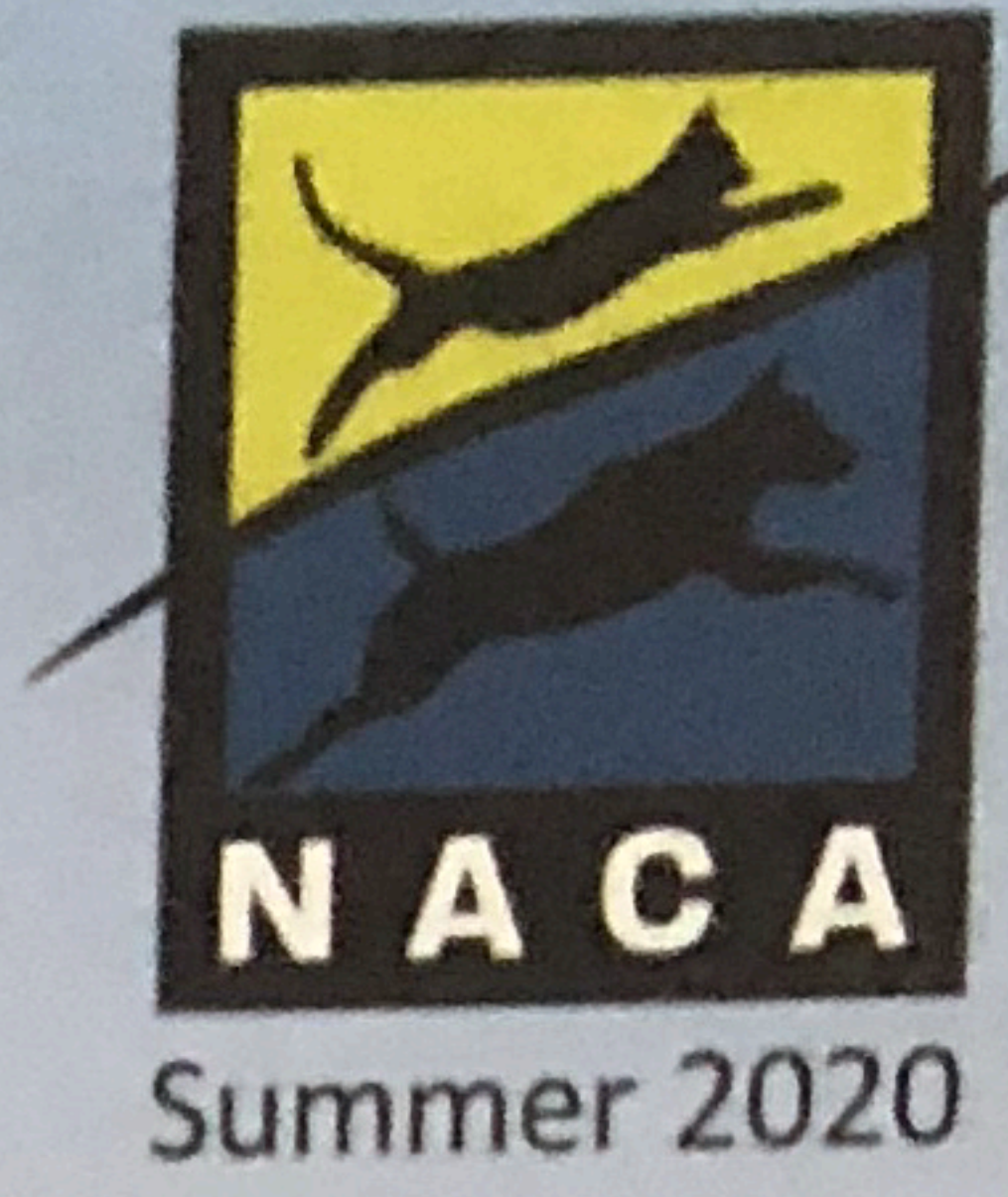


ANIMAL CARE & CONTROL TODAY



A Publication of the National Animal Care and Control Association

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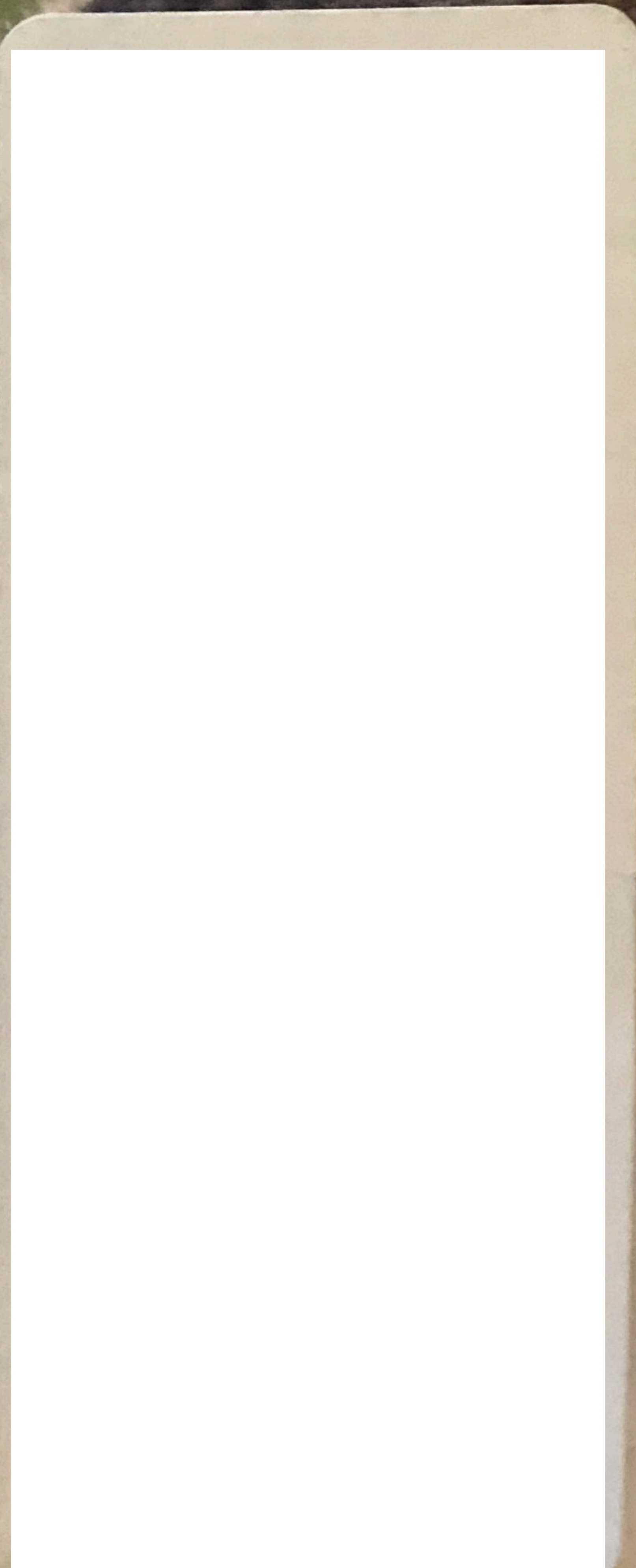
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Coyote Ecology

The Rites (and Wrongs) of Spring and Early Summer



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Chris Schadler

Springtime and early summer mean birth, growth, and renewal. For coyotes, it can also mean bullets, arrows, and killing contests. Killing contests, now illegal in six states and growing, are permitted in most U.S. states, and they are often held at night during the coyotes' short window for breeding. They can result in the loss of one or both members of a breeding pair, and if the female is killed before weaning, orphaned pups will be left to starve at the den and the year's reproductive effort lost. Nevertheless, state wildlife agencies have long turned a blind eye to recreational hunters using trucks, hounds, bait, callers, ATVs, and remote cameras to kill coyotes, receiving money and prizes for slaughtering the most or the largest coyotes. Many hunters claim that the killing helps keep coyote populations manageable. But the impact is exactly the opposite: Indiscriminate killing actually causes coyote numbers to increase and directly threatens ecosystem health and stability.

The Price of Resilience

Along with human-caused mortality, factors such as mange, rabies, tick-borne illnesses, worms, quilling by porcupines, and encounters with competitors all take their toll. Yet, coyote populations still thrive. Biologists call this resilience. Ironically, this may be the one trait that creates the most trouble for coyotes. Animals whose numbers grow despite attempts to eradicate them become, in human parlance, varmints. Rather than admire coyote tenacity, humans despise their resistance to control. We should consider this point closely.

Self-Regulation

How is it that coyotes do not reproduce out of control? The answer is self-regulation. For coyotes, self-regulation occurs most commonly through territoriality. A territory is not just habitat. It is a defended area that contains all of the food, water, cover, and den sites a

pack needs to sustain itself. Depending on the time of year, 70% to 90% of individual coyotes will belong to a territorial group, with the remainder being solitary or transient. Coyote numbers are regulated within their territory by prey abundance and availability of other resources. If there is not enough food, then the social system can break down due to internal conflict over resources — so food regulates the size of the pack.

Further, adults defend and maintain nonoverlapping territories by engaging in highly ritualized behaviors, such as scent-marking, howling, and nonlethal aggression — similar to male birds singing or sparring in the spring. Competition among adult coyotes can be intense, since obtaining and maintaining a territory confers survival, which facilitates reproduction and successful passing of genes to future generations. For this reason, negative encounters between coyotes, pets, and people may increase during breeding season — so be mindful.

A Strict Breeding Season

Coyotes breed between January and March. Female coyotes have a five- to seven-day heat period occurring

only once annually during the breeding season. This abbreviated period of receptivity ensures that two-thirds of female coyotes never breed. It also ensures that there is a much narrower chance of breeding with other wild or domestic canines.

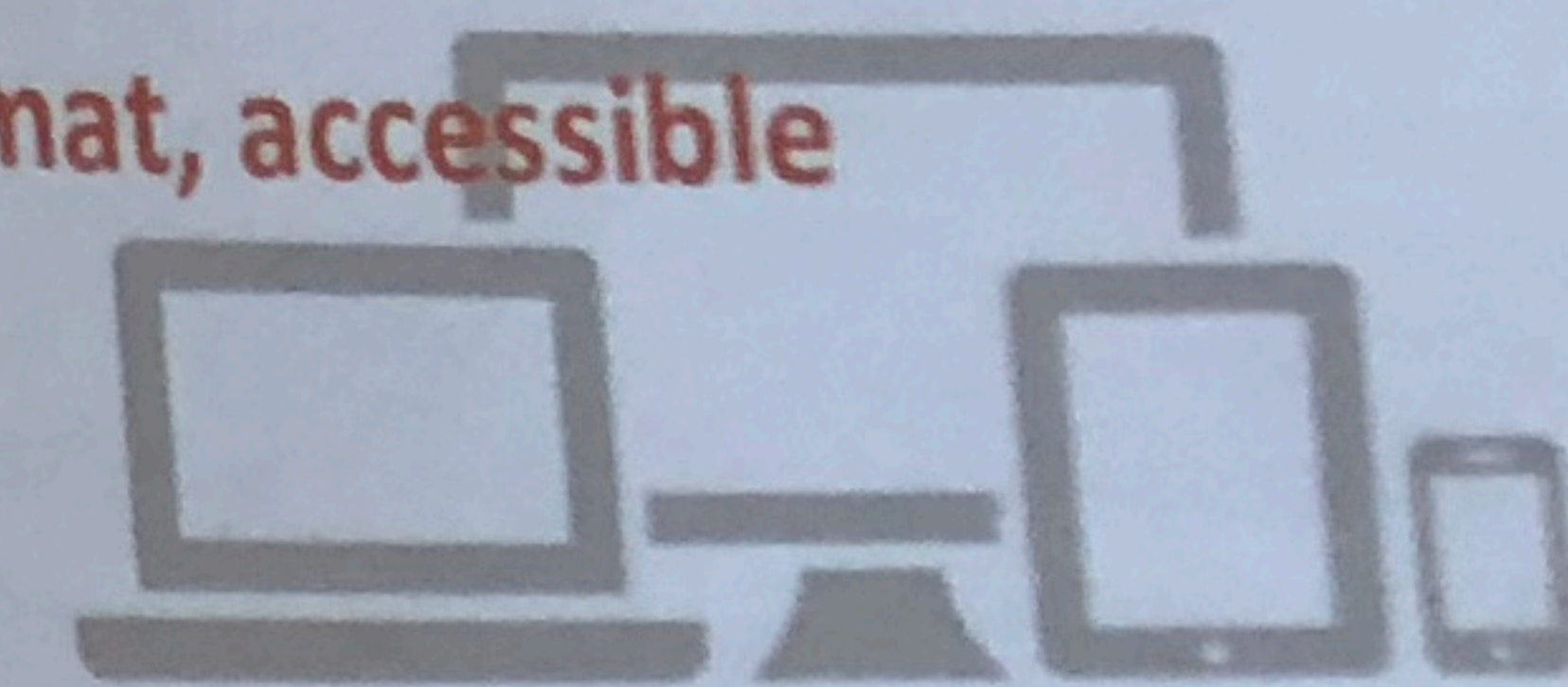
Courtship between an already mated pair may begin in early winter, and the pair will mate whenever her heat season begins, usually early to mid-February. This leads to an average litter of four to six pups 63 days later. Most female coyotes are restricted from successful breeding by a dominance hierarchy; females that are either subordinate or do not belong to a territory do not tend to have pups, while dominant females do. This is another way in which coyote populations self-regulate.

Monogamy

Coyotes are believed to mate for life. A breeding pair forms the basis of a pack, which initially inhabits a territory. If at maturity some pups forgo dispersal (leaving the pack to find another territory), they will become part of the pack. Usually only the breeding pair mate and have a litter of pups each year — a right that is de-

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DOGS AND COYOTES

What you need to know

Coyotes are common in urban areas. Understanding canine behavior and modifying our own behavior is essential to peaceful coexistence with our wild neighbors.

UNDERSTANDING COYOTE BEHAVIOR

- Most interactions with coyotes in urban areas result from the presence of a dog, and/or from intentional or unintentional food availability.
- Coyotes are much like our domestic dogs and share similar behaviors. Curiosity and play are often misinterpreted as being "bold" or aggressive.
- Coyotes are naturally timid, but may view dogs as a threat or as competitors for territories, and for resources. They may defend their mates, their territory, and their pups during breeding season (winter) and pup rearing season (spring & summer). Understandably, they have a young family to protect.
- Coyotes may attempt to escort or divert your dog away from a den site or a food resource. Coyotes do not want to injure themselves, so they may put on a show to get your dog to move along, including a bluff charge or hunching the back, dropping the head and showing teeth. These "threat displays" are intended to scare your dog away without the risk of making physical contact. If the dog doesn't move away, or engages the coyote, the threat may escalate.
- Coyotes' primary food sources in our cities include rats, gophers, insects, and fruit. But human and pet foods (and water) may attract coyotes, so eliminate these attractants to reduce negative encounters.
- Many confrontational behaviors are seasonal, and are often a result of bold dog behavior.

HOW TO COEXIST

- Never let your dog chase or play with a coyote.
- In an area where coyotes have been seen, keep your dog closer to you than usual, and keep them under full control (voice-control or leash) at all times.
- Be aware of what is happening around you and what your dog is doing at all times.
- To protect your small dog, in coyote areas:
 - Avoid using a flexi-leash
 - Avoid walking near bushy areas or "edge zones"
 - Stand or walk with other people, and/or larger dogs
 - Avoid walking small dogs at dawn
- If a coyote gets too close for your comfort, and you can make and maintain eye contact, leash your larger dog or pick up your small dog, and haze the coyote (learn how to do this correctly using our *Coyote Hazing Field Guide*). If the coyote doesn't leave, it's likely there's a den, pups, or food source that the coyote is protecting. Don't run. Leave the area calmly. Change your routine to avoid this challenging area for awhile.
- If a coyote performs a threat display, or two or more coyotes charge your larger dog(s), leash up and leave the area calmly.

Open spaces and urban areas belong to all of us — people, dogs and wildlife. By being responsible dog guardians and minimizing dog interactions with coyotes, we can give each other "breathing room" and peacefully coexist.

PROJECTCOYOTE.ORG

Project Coyote is a national coalition of scientists and educators working together to help communities coexist peacefully with wildlife in urban and rural environments.



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