

Residents learn about living with coyotes

By Mark Pavilons

Coyotes have been roaming southern Ontario for more than a century.

Residents, especially those in rural Caledon, have to learn to live with these animals and find ways to mitigate conflicts to prevent tragedy.

Concerns have been mounting recently over reports of coyote sightings.

To help inform the public, King Township brought in several experts to speak about the Eastern Coyote. The standing-room-only event was held at the Schomberg Library recently, attracting more than 80 residents. Experts from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNR), Coyote Watch Canada and the Toronto Wildlife Centre (TWC) presented many facts and important tips on how to co-exist with these animals.

Eva Bobak of MNR pointed out food supply determines numbers of the Eastern Coyote, who are highly adaptive to fluctuating food sources. They mate for life and breed at this time of year, producing three to nine pups in April or May. The breed has a high mortality rate, with only half surviving their first year. The territory of these families averages 13.5 kilometres in size and while they don't tend to travel in packs, some families stay together.

They tend to remain in their territory and numbers have expanded with the decrease in the population of their main predators ? wolves.

Previous attempts to curb the coyote population didn't work. A ?harvest? actually tends to increase the number of animals.

The coyotes have adapted well to urban areas and are most active during the evening. They have come to associate humans with a source of food. Feeding and improper outside storage of food have increased their presence in communities.

She pointed out that livestock kills by coyotes are rare, but cats and small dogs can fall prey to them.

Bobak said under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, coyotes can be captured, killed and ?harassed,? and residents can use agents to trap or kill these animals if they become a threat. There is no closed season and no limit on coyotes.

To avoid such drastic measures, she said residents can limit contact and potential conflict with coyotes through a few methods. Limit access to food; secure trash; keep cats inside and pick up dog feces. Lighting and fencing are also methods to deter access to properties.

When encountering a coyote, Bobak told residents not to feed them; don't run or back away; be vocal and when hiking, and carry a stick or cane.

Coyotes are not inherently ?bad? and are ?here to stay.?

Lesley Sampson, founding executive director of Coyote Watch Canada, said residents have to decide ?the relationship you have with these animals.?

There are many myths related to these animals, and that's why public sessions like the recent one were so important ? to create ?nature literacy.? People use the terms ?coywolf? or ?coydog,? but these are inaccurate and misleading. There are Eastern Coyotes in Ontario, who don't tend to be aggressive or bold. They can grow to upwards of 44 pounds and are active all year.

Residents often hear their howls, and believe that's during a kill. It's not. They vocalize to claim their territory and alert other animals.

People feeding wild animals is the main reason they're coming closer to settlements. They're very smart animals and as they become more familiar with humans, they will return. But by nature, they are wary and even afraid of people.

The community needs to be engaged, she said, to celebrate animals and not be in conflict with them. She pointed out there are other dangerous predators in our midst ? owls, hawks and eagles ? that will also take small pets.

The coyote is an ?eco-thermometer,? she explained, noting they are an accurate measure of nature and habitat changes.

?Coyote families matter,? she said. ?They keep the community healthy.?

They are also drawn to their natural food source ??rodents. They're ?excellent mousers??and can eat upwards of 1,800 rodents per year. Where rodents go, coyotes follow.

Coyotes have many good qualities, she pointed out. They are diligent, devoted parents, curious and intelligent. They have been known to steal dog toys and balls for their own pups.

A lethal response to coyotes will only bring more animals to the area.

To help deter them, Sampson suggested residents remove bird feeders and seal up holes and crevices that can be used for dens.

In all of her years in field, she said she's never met an aggressive coyote.

Julia Pietrus, of TWC, said they deal with roughly 20 injured coyotes per year.

TWC provides a wildlife hotline, rescue services, medical care and rehabilitation, along with education and outreach services. They receive roughly 30,000 phone calls per year, making it the busiest service of its kind in Canada. TWC has a unique relationship with King Township. Last year, they received some 500 calls from King residents and dealt with roughly 50 animals from the area. Many callers simply want advice on how to help an injured animal. This organization is passionate about helping animals. She pointed out that roughly 2,000 people are killed on Canadian roads every year and roughly a dozen are killed by lightning. One to two Canadians are killed in dog attacks. There have been only two verified coyote killings of humans in the entire history of North America. ?Hazing??is one of the best ways to keep coyotes in check, she said. Loud noises, spraying them with water, and other things can scare them off and let them know who's in charge. Sampson said feeding them, or ?food conditioning,??makes matters worse, and people can stop this right away, changing the animals' behaviour literally overnight. Sampson said CWC does offer resident services and their experts can come to a property to help size up the situation and offer solutions. She said they would love it if residents supplied them with photos to help catalogue coyotes

