

Coyotes pose no real threat to people, large dogs

By Mark Pavilons

The GTA and our green King Township is home to many coyotes.

They are wild animals to be enjoyed and not feared, according to local wildlife experts.

In fact, coyotes will rarely attack medium-sized dogs or even deer, despite beliefs to the contrary.

According to Nathalie Karvonen, executive director of the Toronto Wildlife Centre (TWC), the reality is there's more of a 'people problem' than a coyote issue in the GTA. These animals can thrive in urban centres and especially love the natural hydro corridors and tract lands.

In largely rural King Township, it's a wildlife haven. People may wish to pick and choose which animals to live with, but it's not really our decision to make.

Coyotes, she said, prefer small rodents like field mice, squirrels and rabbits. If hungry enough, they may attack cats or very small dogs like Chihuahuas.

'They're not evil villains,' she said, adding those types of pets can also fall victim to birds of prey.

Coyotes tend to use vocal and posturing tactics, but will defend themselves if provoked. Karvonen said in most encounters with pets, it's the dogs who chase the coyotes. The wild animals will seldom instigate anything. She pointed out there are literally hundreds of cases where dogs attack people each year, but few involving coyotes.

People believe coyotes are pack animals but Karvonen said they typically travel in family units of five or six - the parents and their young. When they howl at night, they tend to sound like a huge pack, but it's usually only the family unit.

Under normal circumstances, coyotes are 'terrified of people,' she said.

She suggests people simply enjoy their beauty, but advises against feeding them. This can change their behaviour and they will return, looking for these food rewards.

'Wild animals don't need to be fed,' she pointed out.

What she does tell residents is to report any coyotes that act or appear strange. They are prone to mange, a condition where ticks burrow into their skin and they end up scratching vigorously trying to get rid of them. This often leads to open wounds and infection and can be fatal. But this contagious condition can be treated and the TWC can help in this regard.

Residents can call their hotline any time. The hotline number is 416-631-0662 and is available 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., 365 days a year. Callers will likely need to leave a message, but their call will be returned shortly.

TWC is dependent on donations, so public support is welcome.

For more, visit <http://www.torontowildlifecentre.com>.