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GTA

'I don't even know if I can turn my back': Shocking video of coyotes snatching family cat comes even as sightings decline in Toronto

On the rise during the pandemic, coyote sightings have fallen but a flurry of social media postings has pet owners worried.

By **Calvi Leon Staff Reporter**

Oct 26, 2023

Article was updated 21 hrs ago



Though reports of coyote sightings have declined in Toronto, social media has seen a flurry of postings about pets being snatched by them.

Ann Brokelman

Afarin Kohan's 11-year-old cat roamed freely on her property since moving to the Don Mills neighbourhood five years ago, entering and leaving the house as she pleases.

Pepper, a Calico, rarely strayed beyond the property lines, so it was unusual when she didn't come home last Thursday night.

A day later, a worried Kohan reported her missing cat to a rescue agency and took to Facebook to ask neighbours for help. "We searched everywhere," she said.

Finally, after hours of reviewing security camera video, Kohan's search reached a painful conclusion — two coyotes had snatched Pepper from the front yard and ran off. "It's just so shocking," she said.



A recent string of coyote attacks on small pets — some widely shared on social media — has led some Torontonians to believe there are more coyotes roaming the city, leaving them fearful for their pets and small children.

Coyote sightings data not the whole story

Coyote sightings rose during the pandemic, but recent data from the city suggests the dangers have not increased since. There were 194 coyote sightings so far this month, down from the 595 sightings in October 2022 and 462 the year prior. July and August were the only months so far this year when the number of sightings — 264 and 217, respectively — increased from the year earlier.

With 620 reported sightings, November 2021 was the highest month on record from January 2020 until this month.

The numbers suggest a trend but don't tell the whole story. The sightings are not confirmed and do not reflect the number of coyotes that actually live in the GTA. The same coyote may be reported by multiple people in the same area, creating duplication.

Experts also say it's typical to see them during the colder months, when there is less foliage on the trees and the animals move through neighbourhoods looking for easy access to food.

It's also possible that residents are mistakenly identifying animals like foxes or dogs as coyotes. It's a trend Coyote Watch Canada is seeing across the country, said Lesley Sampson, founding executive director of the wildlife non-profit.

"There is a lack of overall general education to help folks effectively and correctly identify the wildlife," she said.

According to Toronto Animal Services, the number of coyote sightings has declined in part because not as many people are working from home all day and because of a new bylaw banning wildlife feeding anywhere in the city limits.

Reports of pets chasing wildlife rise

A more concerning trend, however, is the rise in reports of people allowing their dogs to chase wildlife, especially coyotes, Sampson said. "(Pet owners) see them in the distance and let their dog chase. It's really invaluable to recognize that coyotes look at other dogs as competition or a threat."

Coyotes have roamed Toronto's parks and streets for decades and are an important part of the ecosystem, helping to control rodent and rabbit populations. "They thrive in urban areas because of the abundance of food and shelter available to them," according to Toronto Animal Services.

The city's new animal bylaw aims to address the primary driver of coyote behaviour: human food. Feeding wildlife in public parks was banned in 2001, but the bylaw was updated earlier this year to now include private property.

"If we look at the number of coyote bites to people, most often those are the direct result of a human food or a human conditioning that animal," Sampson said. "It's like a dog that wants to be fed."

The recent coyote attacks on cats underscore the importance of not feeding wildlife, because doing so would only increase the animal's "proximity tolerance" to humans, she added.

The four-legged animals that resemble something of a mix between a dog and a fox are shy and timid in nature, with close family ties. Rarely do they pose a threat or attack humans, experts say. However, they can pose a threat to pets.

Attack on pet leaves family frightened

In Kohan's case, her cat Pepper was attacked by two coyotes in the front of her home — a scary moment that was captured on her security cameras.

The discovery left Kohan heartbroken and concerned for her five-year-old daughter. "We never thought we'd have to be scared of coyotes" so close to home, she said. "Now, I don't even know if I can turn my back."

The coyotes were likely related, possibly siblings or a single parent with a matured pup, Sampson said. A juvenile pup will look adultlike, but are naive and inexperienced as they branch out beyond their home range, she noted.

"If younger siblings are forging off on their own, they don't know that a cat is not a food source," said Sampson. "They don't know what a cat is if they've never seen one before."

Emily Barcza said her six-year-old cat, Pogo, met a similar fate to Kohan's on Oct. 3, when she was killed by a coyote near Lawrence Avenue East and Mount Pleasant Road. "I wish I had been more careful with her," she said.

Barcza said she knows of four other cats in the area killed by coyotes within weeks, two near playgrounds. The incidents have left her warning others about the importance of keeping a watchful eye over their pets. "I want to warn people, because I don't want it to happen to them."

Keep pets indoors, city says

The city suggests pet owners keep their cats indoors or supervised when outdoors to minimize the potential for injury or death — and not just from coyotes.

Sampson was more pointed in her messaging, saying free-roaming pets are not a humane or safe option in a busy or rural scape. "It's alarming that people still decide to allow their pets to free roam outdoors."

Cats, especially, should be kept inside. "They're lovely and they're beautiful, but they belong in the house," she said. "They kill other animals and they get fed indoors. They don't need to be outside doing that."

The city and Coyote Watch Canada urge residents to never feed coyotes or leave food outside, properly dispose of waste at home and in parks, avoid approaching the animals — their dens and their young — and keep properties clear of any clutter and debris.

Kohan said she is taking her cat's death as a lesson to be more diligent about pet safety. "It's unfortunate because I wanted my cat to have the ability to explore the outside world. If I have another cat, it's going to be very hard for me to have her go out without supervision at any point."



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