

God's Dog Rides MAX: Urban Coyotes

ON A BLUSTERY WINTRY DAY IN 2002, a coyote casually wandered through the open doors of a Portland International Airport MAX train and curled up in a window seat—just like any other traveler bound for the city. He had been spotted earlier in the day hunting rodents along the airport runways and later was seen darting in and out among the trains parked at the airport light rail station. Airport security was quickly summoned, and he was peacefully captured and released back to the remotest wilds of the Columbia Slough surrounding the airport. While his mode of travel was a bit unorthodox for his species, his destination was not—coyotes have been making their way into our urban interior for quite some time now.

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are members of the dog family. *Canis latrans* means “talking dog,” a reference to the fact that coyotes have more vocalizations than any other North American mammal except humans. Navajo sheepherders once referred to this incredibly intelligent, adaptive animal as God’s dog. Native American cultures traditionally have revered and appreciated coyotes for their cunning and adaptability—bestowing upon them a central role in their cosmology.

Post-European settlement America has not been so kind. For the better part of two centuries, coyotes have been among the most persecuted animals on the North American continent. Federal government trappers still kill tens of thousands of coyotes each year on rural landscapes in the name of protecting livestock. Despite what has been described as a war on coyotes, these canines have not only survived but flourished.

Today, there are more coyotes than at any time in history, and their range has expanded from the western two thirds of the United States to nearly all of North America. Prior to the 1940s in Oregon, coyotes were considered primarily an eastside animal, with sightings west of the Cascades relatively rare. However, in large part due to the removal of other, larger predator species and clearing of forests, they are common today throughout the state.

Sightings in and around Portland began in the early 1980s and have increased dramatically over the past thirty years. While most frequently observed near natural areas, coyotes are also occasionally seen in neighborhoods and even deep in the urban interior. It is a common misperception that coyote sightings in and around Portland have become more frequent because we have overdeveloped their habitat and they have nowhere else to go—this axiom is true for many species, but not for the coyote. They come to our city of their own volition, drawn by easy food sources, plenty of

cover, and the absence of natural competition. They appear on our urban landscape not because we took habitat from them, but rather because, unlike most larger mammals, they are able to find sustenance on the urban landscapes we have created. Portland is not alone in experiencing the phenomenon of the urban coyote. Coyotes have established themselves in cities across North America.

Coyotes can be found living alone, in pairs, or in packs of up to eight animals. Unlike wolves, coyotes do not typically hunt in packs, so you are most likely to see only one or two individuals at a time, although there may well be more around. Packs will patrol their territories against incursions by other coyotes. Coyotes will take advantage of a wide variety of natural and manmade structures for dens including burrows, downed trees, thick blackberry brambles, culverts, and crawlspaces. Mating typically peaks in February, with young born in April. Litters tend to range from four to seven pups but have been known to exceed ten pups. Like wolves, only the alpha male and female in the pack reproduce, but coyotes are compensatory breeders. If pack structure is disrupted, all members of the pack will begin to breed and produce larger litters—an adaptation that has helped the species withstand even the most intensive levels of lethal control.

Coyotes are true omnivores. While the most common staple in their diet is small rodents, they will also eat rabbits, birds, reptiles, amphibians, bugs, carrion fruit and vegetables, garbage, compost, accessible pet food, and small free-roaming pets—a diversity of food sources that makes our urban landscapes a veritable smorgasbord. They play an important role in controlling other urban wildlife populations that otherwise tend to explode. Studies have shown that rodent populations can increase five to six times following coyote removal. In Chicago, research indicates that coyotes may prey on up to 40 percent of urban and suburban Canada goose nests.

While coyotes are most active between dusk and dawn, they can be seen at any time of the day. Unlike the MAX train coyote, most coyotes are quite shy and secretive. There are far more coyotes around our urban landscape than people realize. For the most part, they simply choose not to be seen. They are, however, curious and will sometimes observe human activity from what they perceive to be a safe distance.

Sadly, the coyote's reception in the urban landscape has not been much better than that received by his rural brethren. It is the risk to humans and pets that garners the most attention—fears that the local media has only been too willing to exploit with a steady succession of “jaws and claws” stories about coyotes. In fact, the risk to humans from coyotes is very small. Thick, dense fur can sometimes make coyotes appear larger than they really are. In Oregon coyotes typically weigh between twenty and thirty pounds. In the entire recorded history of North America, there have been two documented killings of humans by coyotes. There has never been an unprovoked attack documented in Oregon. Attacks that have been documented nationwide have usually been associated with coyotes that have been habituated to food handouts and

have lost their instinctual fear of humans. More people are killed each year by dogs, cows, horses, bees, and jellyfish than have been killed by coyotes over the past two hundred years.

Yes, coyotes will take unattended cats and small dogs. The solution is to keep house pets indoors and monitor them closely when they are outside. Free-roaming pets easily become lost and face a wide array of other hazards including cars, poisons, disease, or attack by other animals. Regardless of whether coyotes are present or not, the life expectancy of an outdoor cat is less than two years, less than a fifth of the life expectancy of an indoor cat. Methods used to control coyotes on urban landscapes, including traps and poisons, are indiscriminate and can kill both non-target wildlife and the very pets they are being employed to protect. More importantly, new coyotes quickly replace those who have been removed—even at the highest levels of control,



there is no reason to believe that the next time you open the door and let Fluffy loose that a new coyote will not be wandering through the area.

One thing is certain—coyotes are here to stay. Let us greet this survivor not with fear and loathing, but with appreciation for the important niche it fills in our urban ecosystem, for its fascinating life history, and most of all for its incredible ability to persevere under the most difficult of circumstances.

By Bob Sallinger, illustration by Allison Bollman

Streaked Horned Larks

Visitors to open spaces in North and Northeast Portland might have the opportunity to see a particularly rare songbird that only occurs in the Pacific Northwest: the streaked horned lark (*Eremophila alpestris strigata*). Males are identifiable by a bright yellow face, distinct black stripes on the throat and cheek, a brick-red color on the back and head, and small, black, horn-like feather tufts. Once common from British Columbia to southern Oregon, the lark's population has plummeted due to alteration of river floodplains and loss of 99 percent of its nesting grassland habitat. Recent surveys indicate that there may be as few as three thousand streaked horned larks left in the wild.

Streaked horned larks nest and raise their young on the ground in sparsely vegetated grasslands. Faced with near complete loss of their native habitat, they cling to existence on some of our wildlife refuges and, somewhat more surprisingly, on undeveloped, industrial landscapes, including the vacant, grassy areas surrounding Portland International Airport, which represents one of the last strongholds for the streaked horned lark in northern Oregon.

In recent years there has been a focus on creating more habitat for this species at Portland natural areas—as it is likely that the streaked horned lark will be listed under the Endangered Species Act in the near future. Be sure to watch for this distinctive little bird and to listen for its delicate, high-pitched song, often performed in flight.

—Dave Helzer and Bob Sallinger