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High-cat diet: urban coyotes feast on pets, study finds

A study of coyote scat in LA found the animals are attracted to fruit in gardens, where they are also finding cats and dogs

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Doug McIntyre let his cat, Junior, out of the house on a sunny summer morning last June.

As Junior walked down the path and into the world, he paid special attention. “I had a funny feeling ... just an odd sensation that something was off,” McIntyre, a journalist and radio host,

recalled in a column at the time.

Junior, a beloved part of the family, had been found five years before living in the parking lot of a Los Angeles radio station, covered with fleas and suffering from a blood infection. All day, McIntyre waited for Junior to return, to no avail. The next morning, as he and his wife were putting up missing pet flyers, they ran into a neighbor who said her husband had seen Junior in the mouth of a coyote.

It's a common story in southern California, and one now backed up by research: a new study by the National Park Service has found that 20% of urban coyotes' diets is made up of cats.

Once restricted to the western plains, coyote populations are surging in cities across the US. They are master adapters who have learned to survive in urban environments - a recent study found coyotes present in 96 out of 105 cities surveyed. But many communities are struggling to figure out new ways to deal with predators in their neighborhoods.

In Los Angeles there were 16 coyote attacks on humans in 2016, up from two in 2011. For small pets, the danger is even greater. Reports of coyotes attacking cats in the daytime - even in Hollywood - have popped up on social media. A neighborhood in Culver City recorded 40 pet deaths from coyotes in just six months last year. "Coyotes are the top - besides us - in urban landscapes," says Justin Brown, a biologist for Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area who conducted the study.

The NPS's findings come from a new investigation of coyote's poop. Brown - along with a team of volunteers - dissected more than 30,000 specimens of scat collected from two different sites over the course of two and a half years. They found a number of strange things: work gloves, rubber bands, condoms, even a piece of a computer keyboard.

One of the most startling findings has been that people's gardening choices could be contributing to the problem of disappearing pets. A quarter of coyotes' diet was found to be ornamental fruit, including fruit from palm trees, small red berries called pyracantha, and grapes found around people's homes. These trees attract coyotes, who - once in the neighborhood - are also finding cats and small dogs. "We are subsidizing the coyotes with these gardens," says Brown.

All this rings true to Niamh Quinn, a human wildlife interactions adviser at the University of California at Irvine, who has done similar studies at her lab. Quinn, who is not involved in the park service research, has done DNA analysis on the stomachs of more than 300 coyotes that became roadkill.



A coyote walks through Griffith Park, the nation's largest urban park, in Los Angeles, California. Photograph: David McNew/Getty Images

It's a bit of a grisly process: first the researchers use a sieve to sift out the stomach contents, looking for hard parts like fur. "We have found baseballs, shoes, furniture, bedazzled jewels," she adds. Then the contents are put into a blender, whirled around and placed into a machine for DNA extraction. Her latest research, yet to be published, has used DNA to confirm that cats form at least a fifth, if not more, of coyotes' diet.

All this raises the question: are coyotes getting more populous, or more bold? While the city and state do not track numbers, anecdotal evidence suggests both realities could be at play. McIntyre recalls how he only used to see coyotes at night a decade ago; now he catches them sunbathing on his back patio. "It was sitting on the patio furniture, just like a dog, taking in the morning rays," he says, recalling an incident last week. "That never used to happen."

In light of all this, some are developing tools to help pet owners better manage their relationship with the new neighbors. Quinn, the DNA analyst, has created the Coyote Catcher app, a crowd-sourcing tool that allows people to report coyote attacks or near-misses in their area. In 2018, the app recorded 135 cat deaths by coyote attack, and 58 dog deaths.

Brown advises people to keep their pets safe by reducing food sources like fruit trees, pet food, cat colonies, trash left around. Fruit should be harvested and trash covered. "That's the easiest way to protect your pets - just reduce food sources available," he says.

These days, McIntyre has two cats. But he's keeping them both indoors.

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