

Felis catus and the cull of the wild



We criminalize coyotes for doing what comes naturally, while turning a blind eye to the impact of domestic pets

By Erin Luther

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Residents of Sarnia, Ont., have recently gotten a taste of something Torontonians experienced last winter. A coyote snatched a pet cat from a porch in the Southwestern Ontario city in broad daylight while the neighbours looked on in horror – one of several incidents reported involving coyotes. Council is currently considering wildlife management proposals aimed at solving the coyote “problem.”

We can only hope this incident won't spark the kind of media circus that surrounded the coyote in Toronto's Beaches neighbourhood in February and March. Neville, as that coyote came to be called, earned a death sentence – later reduced to life in a sanctuary when the Minister of Natural Resources issued a pardon – for the crime of failing to discriminate between a groundhog and a chihuahua. Articles about coyotes were rife with aggressive descriptors of a “brazen” coyote who was “stalking” innocent pets. Sensationalists warned that children were next.

Neville's type are not a threat to people. There are only a handful of coyote attacks each year across North America. To put that in perspective, Toronto received reports of more than 600 dog-to-human bites in 2008. We are millions of times more likely to be injured by our own pets than by any wild animal. But as anyone with a phobia can tell you, our fears are not always proportional to reality.

Coyotes can pose a threat to domestic animals, as the reports from Toronto and Sarnia show. Whether this threat should be considered newsworthy is another question – a recent study by Shannon Grubbs and Paul Krausman tracked a group of Arizona coyotes over a period of four months. They found that 42 per cent of their coyotes' diet consisted of cats. The only thing unusual about the Ontario incidents was that there were witnesses.

People begin to develop mental maps about animals early in life. From a young age, children know which animals live on the farm, in the forest, in the home. As we grow older, we develop a set of beliefs and behavioural codes for each group. These codes tell us, for example, that it is okay to eat farm animals, but not okay to eat pets. Wild animals are to be admired, watched and occasionally feared. Domestic animals are to be cuddled, played with and treasured.

Felis catus, which has an honoured place in a quarter of Canadian homes, should fit squarely in the category of domestic animal. Yet many people still think of domestic cats as semi-wild. As their owners attest, cats cannot be “mastered” in the same way as dogs: They can be fickle, aloof, and do not obey our commands. This may be why so many pet owners feel justified in allowing pet cats to wander the streets unsupervised. Is this why we let them take their chances against cars, predators and diseases? Is this why we turn a blind eye to the annual slaughter of billions of wild animals by free-roaming cats? Because we think cats still have the wild in them?

It is time to end this categorical confusion. Cats are no more wild animals than hamsters are. If anything, they are less so: Today's pet-store hamsters descend from a wild cousin captured in the 1930s, whereas household cats have been molded by 4,000 years of domestication. No one would put a hamster outside to fend for itself. Cats need our protection too: Outdoors, they have a life expectancy of fewer than five years; indoors, they typically live 12 to 15 years.

Cats themselves suffer the effects of our pseudo-mythologies about their wild natures, but they also exact a high cost in the ecosystems where we release them. Some outdoor cats kill 100 wild animals a year, and studies have found that cats kill a lot more animals than their owners are typically aware of. A cat catching only “the occasional bird,” as some owners report, is not as insignificant as it might seem.

The impact of Canada's 5.5 million outdoor pet cats and our uncounted number of feral cats reaches far beyond our backyards, deep into the ecosystems that support human life. But our hostile reaction to coyotes preying on them betrays a double confusion of the categories into which we sort our animals.

It makes no sense to criminalize wild animals for doing what is normal for them, and then throw up our hands that domestic cats are too “wild” for us to limit their predation of native species. We have an obligation to give our wild animals the space they need, and to guard the animals that we have bred to be our companions.

Erin Luther is author of the Toronto Wildlife Centre resource book Answering the Call of the Wild: A Hotline Operator's Guide to Helping People and Wildlife.