

## Coyotes slink in to stay

**Suspected of cat nabbing in Seminole, the predator eats almost anything and adapts easily to city life.**

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SEMINOLE -- A mystery lurks here in suburbia.

The cats, two dozen and counting, still are missing. The coyote some think is responsible continues to put in an occasional appearance, flitting at the edge of a 182-acre county nature preserve.

Neighbors are demanding the county do something, but park officials say there's no proof the coyote is the culprit.

"Are they going to wait for a coyote to kill a child?" asked Denis Falcon, a dentist who lives near the park and has lost four cats.

While the disagreement lingers, one thing is clear: Urban coyotes are here to stay. Florida's newest villain is an adaptable predator, poised to join the ranks of alligators and sharks as a beast to be feared and loathed.

In recent years, coyotes have been migrating through the central and southern parts of the state but had been virtually unheard of in developed areas like Seminole.

In the Tampa Bay area, they've been implicated in cat killings in Citrus County, and photographed at a bear counting station in Hernando County. In the name of aviation safety, a dozen recently were trapped at Tampa International Airport.

"The trapper is confident there are more," said Brenda Geoghagan, airport spokeswoman.

Coyotes have been seen in every Florida county except Monroe, and it's only a matter of time before they're howling in Key West at happy hour.

"Part of the discomfort that people have is that they're not expecting to see wildlife on their well-manicured lawns and on their residential streets," said Catherine Flegel, a Pinellas environmental research coordinator.



**Graphic:**  
Florida's newest intruder

Coyotes are turning up in Florida's suburban neighborhoods, a phenomenon that has become common in other parts of the country. The magnet is food, a flexible definition in the coyote world.

They eat watermelon -- yes, watermelon -- off the vine. Cats. Garbage. Rabbits. Berries. Road kill. There are reports of coyotes digging up the eggs of endangered sea turtles and unearthing the nests of burrowing owls.

"When they're hungry," said Martin Main, a University of Florida assistant professor studying the Florida coyote population, "they'll eat just about anything."

Along with raiding outdoor dog dishes, they may leave an unpleasant surprise for homeowners who allow female dogs outside unattended: Coyotes will interbreed with domestic dogs, creating a coy-dog -- a particularly uncomely mix that is comfortable around people but as unprincipled as its wild parent.

Main said that while there likely are a small number of coy-dogs in Florida, the number of coyotes in general appears to be increasing. Although population estimates are not available, Main's study shows the density is increasing.

Once a year, Main calls upon fellow researchers around the state to put out 700 scent discs -- think dog chum -- to attract coyotes.

"They're really stinky," Main said. "They smell like rancid fat."

More coyotes "hits" are being documented each year. The animals are breeding, a half-dozen pups to an annual litter. They're likely still migrating here. Many researchers believe coyotes have been using highways to come from the Western states where they are most prevalent.

"They just kind of trotted on in," Main said.

The demise of the red wolf in Florida, a natural coyote predator, also has been associated with the rise of the coyote.

All of which supports the prediction that coyotes will become as commonplace as raccoons in your garbage cans and alligators in your neighborhood pond.

"They have been reported in very urban areas -- anywhere there's enough food for them to survive," Main said. "They are very clever animals. They are survivors."

Coyotes have been spotted in downtown Chicago, suburban Detroit, Los Angeles and New York City. Earlier this month, one tried to drag a 6-year-old girl into some bushes near a Vancouver tennis court.

However, attacks on people are uncommon. Like alligators, coyotes that have been fed by humans are the most likely to go after people, typically children. Mother coyotes seeking food for pups also have been associated with aggression toward humans.

Three years ago, a coyote attacked a child in Massachusetts, the first human attack in the state's history. While authorities at the time expressed shock, in retrospect, it had been a long time coming.

For several years before the incident, the state's coyote population had been on the rise, as were incidents of coyotes eating cats and dogs.

But in 1998, around the town of Sandwich, there were reports of a coyote being particularly aggressive toward people. One had pulled a child -- in a sleeping bag -- out of a tent. Then, authorities suspect the same animal attacked a 3-year-old boy on a swing set in his back yard. The animal would not let go until the child's mother kicked and punched it. Then it hung around, growling at the boy's 5-year-old sister who was atop the swing set. Police shot the coyote. It did not have rabies.

In California, urban coyotes are a part of everyday life. The state puts out a brochure suggesting, among other things, that people watch their children closely when outdoors.

"The potential is there," said Patrick Foy, a California Fish & Game biologist. "But you are far more likely to be attacked by your neighbor's dog."

Foy said coyotes are unbelievably fast and smart in urban settings. House cats are no match for them. It is his experience that by the time you see one coyote, there is probably a substantial population.

"If you start seeing coyotes, you are guaranteed of having a whole lot more than the one or two you see in the odd chance," Foy said.

Jean Moore, who lives in rural Citrus County, has seen plenty of them in recent years, though none this summer. Her sister, who lives nearby, lost 26 cats to marauding coyotes. The sister had been operating a sort of freelance shelter for strays, which she no longer does. After the attacks, which happened two years ago, Moore noticed an increasing boldness in the coyotes' behavior.

"They just stare at you," Moore said. "You can be outside and they'll be at the edge of the woods, staring at you. Even in daylight."

In Hernando County, coyote tracks are commonplace at the Weekiwachee preserve, said Mary Barnwell, a senior land management specialist for the Southwest Florida Water Management District.

"There are coyotes all over Florida now," she said. "It doesn't surprise me that you're getting them in Pinellas County. They're very adaptable."

The controversy over that adaptability and its consequences simmers on in Seminole.

Judy Jarosz, supervisor for the newly opened Boca Ciega Millennium Park, sees her mission as creating a refuge for both people and wildlife to enjoy. It's not a place for roaming house cats, which exact a death toll on the park's 160 bird species.

Jarosz says the cat owners have a responsibility for the safety of their pets, and she points out that local ordinances forbid them from running free. Besides county law, there is natural law to consider. Once they're in the park, they're part of the food chain.

"Whenever they run free, they end up being a predator or prey," Jarosz said.

The coyote, if it is killing cats, is not going to be trapped unless it begins to lose its fear of humans, Jarosz said.

It all is frustrating to Falcon, who recently got a call from a sobbing neighbor who had lost a second cat. He talks of more coyote sightings -- on Park Boulevard, on Oakhurst Road, and the pre-dawn incident in which a coyote was seen with a dead cat in its mouth.

He said that he and neighbors who live around the park would like the county to study the impact of its exotic plant removal in the park. He thinks the habitat change is forcing animals, such as coyotes, out of the park in search of food.

Thus far, he said, no one seems much interested in his suggestions.

"It doesn't seem important enough," Falcon said. "One thing is for sure. I'm not replacing my cats."