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Coyote attacks prompt city to take action

Predators may even be shot after incidents involving two small dogs in the Beach area

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Published On Tue Feb 24 2009

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Emily Mathieu
STAFF REPORTER

The coyote had spent the better part of the morning pacing along the backyard fence.

"These are big animals, at least the ones that are living here," said Theresa Maxwell, clutching Pluto, her chihuahua, to her chest.

Her eyes scanned her yard, watching for the predators that have been stirring up fear on her quiet Beach cul-de-sac. "I think there is more than one and we feel maybe that they were stalking our dogs."



Theresa Maxwell worries for her chihuahua, and children Pipa, 1, above, and Lucy, 3, after their other chihuahua was grabbed by a coyote in their yard.
TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

On Saturday morning, a coyote snatched their 7-year-old chihuahua, Zoe, from their backyard in broad daylight. Maxwell's husband was also outside.

Because the attack on Zoe happened during the day, within steps of her owner, city officials have stepped in. They are searching for the den that may contain as many as two animals, interviewing residents and trying to decide whether the animals need to be removed.

"We are quite concerned," said Eletta Purdy, manager of Toronto Animal Services.

"It's different if the dog is at the back of the yard."

Purdy said hunting small animals is part of normal coyote behaviour.

She said when coyotes cross paths with humans, the city has four options. The first is education, encouraging residents to keep an eye on their garbage and watch smaller pets.

"We think this is perhaps beyond that stage," said Purdy.

The second option is using a humane trap, which Purdy described as extremely difficult.

Next they can make the areas the animals frequent uncomfortable. Purdy would not go into details to avoid the possibility of residents taking the matter into their own hands.

The final option is hiring someone to come in and shoot the animal.

Tranquilizers are not an option because they take 20 to 30 minutes to immobilize the animal. As well, an errant dart could land in a densely wooded area and injure residents or pets later on.

Brad Gates, president of AAA Gates Wildlife Control, said he was not aware of any private organization in Toronto that would remove coyotes.

He said the animals were likely attracted to the area because of food sources like garbage.

Bird feeders can also be a problem, increasing the numbers of rodents and birds in the area.

Moving the Beach coyotes without addressing the issue of potential food sources would be pointless, he said.

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"I guarantee you will have another pair of coyotes in the area."

Zoe was about 5 metres from the house at about 8:45 a.m. when the coyote leapt a 1.2 metre chain-link fence, seized the dog by the scruff of the neck and disappeared up a hill.

She was one of two little dogs attacked in two days.

On Sunday, a coyote attacked another small breed at about 10 p.m. It survived but suffered serious injuries.

Neighbours have also reported seeing coyotes standing next to their windows, watching their pets moving inside.

"We feel really strongly that we have to do something," said Maxwell.

The Maxwells live on Neville Park Blvd., north of Queen St. E.

The street is lined with mid-sized, two-level homes that back onto steep, tree-covered hills topping 30 metres in height.

The trees are tall and dense in parts, but the majority of the land is private and does not back directly onto a larger ravine.

Maxwell has two daughters, ages 3 and 1. While summer will be here in a matter of months, she has no plans to let her daughters outside for now.

"We don't feel safe. ... Everyone says, 'Don't worry, a coyote will never attack a human being,' but I don't feel confident in that."

The coyotes – which Maxwell estimates weigh as much as 27 kilograms – arrived in October.

Since Zoe was snatched, there has been mixed reaction from Beach residents.

Some told the *Star* that living close to ravines means living side-by-side with wildlife, including coyotes.

Maxwell said there has been a lot of misunderstanding about the type of property behind her house. There are trees, but it is private property and separated by a fence.

"We didn't take our dog out walking in the ravine. We were 15 feet from our back door and we don't feel safe in our own fenced yard and that is not acceptable."

She understands why some people might be comfortable living alongside the coyotes, but she wants the animals gone.

"I hope that if nothing is done by the city that we can come together as a community and try to resolve this."

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