

# COYOTE POLICY FOR PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

## BACKGROUND

The first coyote caught in Prince Edward Island was snared near Souris in 1983. Coyotes now occur in all Provinces in Canada having reached both Newfoundland (late 1980's) and Prince Edward Island by crossing Northumberland Strait on the winter ice. Originally an animal of the western Great Plains region, the coyote began extending its range in the late 1800's and now occupies all jurisdictions in North and Central America.

This phenomenal spread of the coyote started after settlement of the west and was aided by land clearing and the reduction or elimination of wolves over much of the eastern continent. However, the animal's adaptable and versatile nature is most responsible for its success. Coyotes have adapted to diverse habitats and climatic conditions and can survive on a wide variety of animals and plants.

## HABITS

Coyotes breed from late January to March and a litter of five to seven young is born in an underground den in April or May. The pups leave the den at eight weeks, learn how to hunt through the summer and disperse in the fall.

The coyote population is currently stable in Prince Edward Island and the species occurs throughout the Province. Fear of being over-run by coyotes is unwarranted, as their populations are self-limiting. Based on studies conducted in Maine, a coyote pair, which often mates for life, will claim and defend a territory of about 50 square kilometres (20 square miles) in which to hunt and raise their young. As the population increased on PEI in the 1980's and '90's the size of the area and availability of suitable habitat limited the number of territories available. Since the carrying capacity appears to have been reached in 2003, it is estimated that about 2,000 animals now populate Prince Edward Island.

Studies have shown that coyotes do not tolerate red foxes within their territories. This has resulted in a reduced red fox population on the Island as foxes are forced to occupy small territories outside and exclusive of those of the coyote. Because of this phenomenon and despite their lower numbers, foxes are frequently seen near homes in rural and suburban areas of the Island.

## FOOD HABITS

Although biologically classified as carnivores (meat eaters) coyotes are omnivorous in their eating habits. They will kill and eat live prey, consume dead animals (carrion) and dine on fruit, berries, seeds and grass. A partial list of food items found in

coyote stomachs includes – mice, voles, shrews, squirrels, hares, deer, rabbits, skunks, raccoons, muskrats, beavers, grouse, small birds, domestic livestock (often as carrion), poultry, grass, seeds, apples, blueberries and bayberries.

Coyotes are opportunistic feeders and eat whatever is available. Nowhere has it been shown that coyotes control populations of small prey species such as snowshoe hare or ruffed grouse. In fact it has been shown that the opposite is true. When the population of a particular prey species is high, predators feed on them. When the prey population is low predators turn to alternate sources of food and, for the coyote, these alternatives are many and varied. If alternatives are unavailable, then the predator population will decline.

## CONFLICTS WITH HUMANS

The vast majority of coyotes feed on wild, natural sources of food. However, it is well known that a few coyotes will prey on small domestic farm animals, particularly lambs, sheep and poultry. Newborn calves born in the open field are also vulnerable.

Sheep breeders on the Island are aware of the problems coyotes can cause to their flocks and most have taken appropriate steps to mitigate coyote predation. Techniques such as predator-proof electric fencing, guard dogs and guard donkeys have proven helpful in reducing losses to coyotes. Workshops have also been held to teach sheep farmers the proper methods of trapping problem coyotes.

To prevent loss of newborn calves, farmers are advised to have cows calve in barns rather than open fields. Once cow and calf are up and around, problems with coyotes are uncommon. Similarly a coyote is no match for a mare with a foal.

House cats and small dogs are also vulnerable and pet owners are advised to keep them from roaming unattended in the wild.

## HUMAN SAFETY

The arrival of the coyote on Prince Edward Island has given rise to fears for human safety, particularly that of small children. Documented cases of coyotes attacking children have occurred in western North America and are **extremely rare**. They are invariably associated with coyotes that have lost their fear of humans as a result of being fed, often in campgrounds or urban areas.

Coyotes are normally very wary of humans, avoiding contact whenever possible. However, certain precautions are advisable. Food should not be left where coyotes can find it, and animals that are acting strangely should be reported.

### COYOTE CONTROL

There is no practical way of preventing the natural increase in coyotes on Prince Edward Island. History has shown that poisoning, trapping, shooting from snowmobiles and aircraft, hunting with hounds, and bounty incentives, have consistently failed to reduce their numbers.

Nova Scotia's experience with a \$50 bounty during the 1980's emphasizes the futility of coyote control. In spite of the bounty, the coyote population continued to expand at the same rate in Nova Scotia as it had in New Brunswick, practically doubling every year. Bounties paid for coyotes went from \$2,250 to \$22,100 in four years at which time the Province wisely eliminated the bounty.

Since all coyotes are not problem animals, it makes sense to direct efforts at controlling those coyotes that prey on livestock or, even better, preventing the problems from occurring in the first place.

### FACTORS

- Coyotes are here to stay.
- Coyote population control is futile.
- Most coyotes survive by eating wild natural foods (rabbits, mice, carrion, berries, etc.).
- Coyotes may be seen in fields hunting for small mammals while posing no direct threat to livestock.
- A small portion of the population may turn to killing livestock, mainly lambs, sheep, poultry and young calves. It is this segment of the population that needs control.

As with any animal, it is always easier to keep them from learning bad habits than to break those habits once they are established. There are number of steps that can be taken to reduce potential problems:

- Livestock producers should not dispose of dead stock by dragging it to the back fields or woods. Coyotes are carrion eaters and this will simply give them a taste for domestic livestock, which could lead to later predation.
- Sheep producers, in particular, should consider adopting measures to mitigate predation by

coyotes **before** coyotes become a problem, by installing predator-proof electric fences, acquiring guard dogs, guard donkeys, etc.

- Cows should have their calves in barns or other shelters and not in open fields.
- Owners of house cats and small dogs should not allow them to roam at large.
- Coyotes should not be fed. This rule applies to all mammalian carnivores.

### POLICY

In conclusion the policy regarding coyotes in Prince Edward Island is as follows:

1. Coyotes will continue to be recognized as game and furbearing animals under the Prince Edward Island Wildlife Conservation Act.
2. The Province will continue to set seasons for harvesting coyotes and will regulate their hunting and trapping.
3. The Department will provide the public with information on the species' biology, habits and means of coping with coyotes.
4. The Department will continue to co-operate with the Department of Agriculture in ascertaining coyote predation on livestock and will provide advice to livestock producers on methods to mitigate predation.
5. The Department will provide farmers with the names of trappers and hunters living in their vicinity who could be called upon to trap coyotes when such action is warranted.
6. The Department will continue to deal with general complaints, inquiries and requests for information from the public.

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