

Coyote Encounters: What to do When Walking Your Dog

By: Chaz Wilke - Staff Writer



The crisp autumn air greets you at dawn as you shake off your slumber and prepare for a morning walk. You've nestled into the healthy habit of a good 45 minute walk with your pups before work. You know you should get those fur babies good and tired so they'll sleep soundly while you're away.

The days are getting shorter at this point in the year but your daily schedule hasn't budged. This leaves you in a bind. On one hand, you now get to enjoy the sunrise with your dogs. On the other, dawn and dusk are the prime hunting time for coyotes.

Coyotes might not be a species you think about much if you don't have dogs. Sure, you might have a working knowledge of these dog-like creatures. You might have even seen one here or there when you're driving at night:

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But for dog owners, coyotes are a real concern.

Coyotes are naturally fearful of humans, which once was our greatest strength in protecting our pets. But the exceptional (<http://bit.ly/1QUxo3P>) West Coast drought continues unabated. Much of the coyote hunting grounds that once kept this species tucked further away from society are now desolate. They're now descending into neighborhoods in greater numbers, surprising (http://la.curbed.com/archives/2015/07/los_angeles_urban_coyotes.php) Los Angeles-area biologists.

Walking a dog these days, you'll get numerous warnings from random strangers on the street. "Watch out for coyotes," they'll say. Some might regale in stories about seeing coyotes on one street or another. Some may offer the unhelpful advice that this is coyote country and we're all merely visiting. But if you're a dog owner and have never had an early morning or evening run in with a coyote, you're in for some sobering news: that will likely change.

These beasts don't wear jangling collars, they move silently. They aren't floppy or playful and are only cute in that generic furry sense. Coyotes are wild and hungry. This means that bit of unhelpful advice is actually true: when we are outside we are on their turf. Coyotes know exactly where you are even when you think you're alone. And if you see one, there's a chance there are five more circling silently behind you.

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Since coyotes are losing fear of humans, this puts our pups in a position where it becomes much harder for us to protect them from getting picked off as we walk. The coyote's fear of man has dipped so low that Irvine police's Animal Services Unit is now shooting paintballs at the wild animals to remind them that we are the ones to be feared (<http://bit.ly/1OTajks>).

Lt. John Condon, manager of the Animal Services Unit considers this measure a form of hazing. "They're becoming very comfortable in the populated areas, so this just kind of raises the level of intensity of the hazing to make it a lot more uncomfortable for them," he said (<http://bit.ly/1L27E1P>).

The number of recent attacks is abnormally high, and injuries range from minor scratches to a punctured neck (<http://bit.ly/1OfZ9Vm>) that a 3-year-old girl suffered from a coyote attack while she played in Los Angeles's Elysian Park in September.

Many local experts find this increase in coyote interaction with civilization to be unprecedented. The uptick in attacks is likely due to humans feeding the wild animals, either directly or indirectly. Since coyotes are looking for food in our refuse, like raccoons would, it is more important than ever to secure your dumpsters and garbage cans outside.

What you can do while walking your dogs

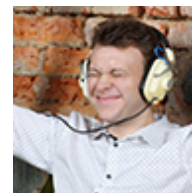
Get big, get loud, and *do not run*. These three things should keep you and your pups safe from the majority of coyote encounters. But, what if you are walking your dogs alone and find yourself face to face with a coyote? Say you mindlessly wait while your pups sniff some plants near a street corner. Say that you are close to home near the end of your walk. Your guard is down, your mind is wandering. A coyote silently rounds the corner and is instantly close enough to pounce. What then?

Instinctively, you'll want to run and at that same moment your pups will likely enter protection mode and bark at the coyote. Both of those instinctual decisions can be dangerous. It is important not panic at this moment., as what happens in the seconds to follow will greatly affect the outcome.



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First, take a visual inventory of the coyote's body cues. Is its head down? Is it growling? Is the coyote in hunt or observation mode? Then search your periphery to make sure it's alone and you're not getting surrounded as you turn to stare him down. Keep your dogs close and if possible, pick them up. Make sure the coyote doesn't inch closer while you do this.

Square off and stare down the coyote, chest broad, head tall and scream bloody murder at it. If this doesn't get him to move, begin to turn away confidently while keeping eye contact. Take a step away from the beast. If the coyote follows, stop immediately. Turn and wait while keeping eye contact. You are exhibiting signs of aggression while doing this, but if you run it will trigger the coyote's chase instinct. Show the coyote that you are not something to nibble on and your pups are not its snack.



How you can prevent this in the first place

There is safety in numbers. Walking with a friend, spouse or family member will increase the chances that you won't even see a coyote during these times of the day. If you do have a confrontation when there is more than one of you, hand the leash or leashes to your companion. Then advance on the coyote keeping a menacing eye contact and shout as loud as you can. Don't let the fear of looking stupid overpower the fear of losing your dogs to a hungry coyote.

Remember that spring is when coyotes begin teaching their own pups to hunt. During this time, coyotes are considerably more adventurous, stubborn and aggressive. Be observant to the body cues the coyote gives off. Know when charging at the beast will be effective. You don't want to provoke a counterattack.

Takeaway

Staying safe at dawn and dusk while walking pups requires you to pay attention and remain adaptive to quickly evolving situations. Don't sacrifice your dog's safety because you're groggy or obsessed with your phone. And remember that coyotes inhabit the same neighborhoods as people. It is up to you to pay attention and prevent a dangerous confrontation in the wee hours. Stay alert. Stay safe.

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