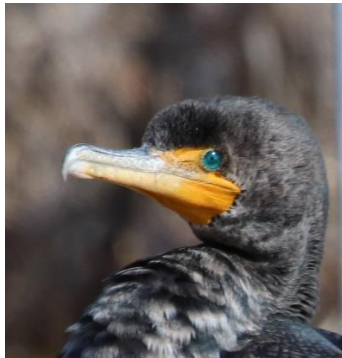


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In praise of coyotes

Birds I View

Bill Montevecchi



Cormorants like coyotes are often culled. [photo: Bill Montevecchi]

Better stay away from him, He'll rip your lungs out, Jim
I'd like to meet his tailor, Werewolves of London

Warren Zevon

As NEAT readers are aware, this column isn't always focused solely on birds. This month we take aim at coyotes.

Like cormorants, seals and sometimes crows, coyotes get a lot of bad press. Wolves too have also borne the brunt of negative perceptions, bounties, culls and hatred. Wolves are being hunted down and culled in Alberta and British Columbia. Some have been shot from helicopters bearing down on them as they try in desperation to flee.

The rationale for the wolf cull is to save caribou. The caribou are in danger because their wilderness habitat has been ravaged and fragmented by oil and gas exploitation, wilderness sports developments and the like. It is we who are endangering the caribou.

The wolves – the natural predators of caribou – are symptomatic of our impacts. And as is so often the case in these circumstances, the sins of the family are deflected at others. So we kill the wolves. And when the wolves are gone, we will likely continue to direct our attention away from root causes and responsibility.

Wolves got bad press when they lived on the island of Newfoundland until the early 1900s. Negative perceptions and bounties promoted their extinction. Given the expanses of wilderness on the Island, it seems incredible that some wolves did not survive. Howling wolves are still heard in Abruzzi Mountains outside Rome where a legendary female suckled the city's founding fathers. The hard hunting Italians pursue almost every creature,

including tiny warblers for polenta sauces “that could make your eyes cry”. Yet there are still wolves in Italy and not here?

Wolves roam the Big Land. And a few still wander across the pack ice in the Strait of Bell Isle onto the Island from southern Labrador. Unfortunately, trophy hunters dog these few animals down. You might even be considered a hero for killing the last wolf on the Island.

The niche for a large canid

The extinction of the wolf left a vacant niche for a large canid predator on the Island. And coyotes are occupying some of it.

Recent telemetry studies by NL biologists show that there are resident and wandering transient coyotes on the Island. The wandering coyotes are remarkable. Some move from coast to coast.

These wanderers must be terrifically resourceful. During mid-winter, one coyote ventured out on the pack ice off of St. Anthony and remained on the ice for 3 weeks likely hunting and scavenging seals. The coyote visited the Groais Islands on its southward trek, returning to land more than 200 km distant on the Baie Verte peninsula.

Coyote sightings and public panic

Given their over-riding tendency to fear and flee from humans, why do we always seem ready to launch into a lock-down mode and call out the SWAT teams whenever a coyote is sighted near a community?

Sightings and alerts are useful, and rabid canines be they domesticated dogs, foxes, coyotes or wolves are a public concern. These are not the concerns I address here. My focus is about accommodating wildlife rather assaulting it. Our fears are misplaced and inappropriate to the situations at hand.

Sure coyotes can be hunted for their magnificent pelts – yet there is no reason to despise them or attribute some noble goal to those who hunt them for bounties. As with people – you won’t like every one, but this is no justification to vilify them as a species.

My encounters with coyotes

My introduction was a rather ethereal almost spiritual one. Sleeping under the open sky of a Nevada desert, I awoke in an enchanting pre-dawn purple light. From near and far, a mysterious and mystical chorusing permeated the desert dawn. Yodeling coyotes were bidding adieu to one another and to the night.

My next experience was in the Little Grand Lake Provisional Wilderness Reserve. During a helicopter survey of the reserve, we came upon a coyote on a caribou kill. The coyote was huge – I was hoping it was a wolf. I imagined it was the 1800s ... it was a ferocious and wild Newfoundland.

While hiking a wooded area in the Codroy Valley, my next interaction was a surprise. A small beautiful coyote ran into a nearby meadow. Both a bit shocked at one another’s proximity, we locked gazes. I hoped the animal would stay but it quickly ran off fearful of my presence. An interesting but all too brief an encounter.

My most recent contact was on an early morning winter run along the Saskatchewan River in Saskatoon. It was a frigid morning, the ice air was hard and sharp and the snow squeaked underfoot. It was a morning when you ran for heat and tried to outdistance the cold. Rounding a bend about 50 feet ahead in the centre of the trail stood the most beleaguered and raggedly mangy coyote that I'd ever seen. She looked desperate. I stopped dead.

Her wild eyes penetrated mine. Clearly one of us was going to have to move though it wasn't clear who. I didn't move - not wanting to be the first commit. I'd let the coyote decide.

If I had met a deer or rabbit in mid-trail, I would have no doubt moved aside quickly. Yet the coyote evoked a caution that made stand my ground.

We stared – each considering available options and possibilities. After what seemed a long time, the coyote moved off to the side though not far off. She watched me and I her, as I moved by.

As I ran on, I thought about that challenged survivor in the urban environment ... a juxtaposition of the wild and exhaust fumes and city traffic. We must learn to accommodate such wild creatures or we will forsake something that is vitally human.

Coyotes are a lesson in survival. Resiliency in the face of bad press, rumors, and exaggerated unfounded fears. Resiliency in the face of all out attacks, poisoning programs, bounty hunting and hatred. Resiliency in the face of urban encroachment and wilderness developments. Resiliency in the face of us. These beauties are survivors in the best sense ... creatures to celebrate.

Birds in the area

Eight red-breasted mergansers [3 males, 5 females] joined herring gulls feeding near the rocks of Portugal Cove on 14 March [Val Hansen]. These ducks are abundant along the ice edges on the northeast coast.

On the Easter weekend, two brilliant pairs of common mergansers were foraging in small opening in the ice near the Gander Bay causeway. They were likely after smelts as was the nearby crowd of ice-fishers.

In homage to St. Patrick, some of the gannets have returned to Cape St. Mary's. At Cape Spear, Terry James encountered a "flock" of 3 peregrine falcons. The adult and 2 juveniles suggested a family hunting coastal seabirds. Their successes were marked by guillemot and puffin remains. A rare dark gyrfalcon was also hunting the offshore ice leads, and a dark rough-legged hawk worked the cape.

A male downy woodpecker and a black-backed woodpecker been seen near Healy's Pond (Chantelle Burke). A distinctive crow with a mis-shaped outstretched right leg that had been visiting Val Hansen's feeder in Portugal Cove for about a year hasn't been seen since mid-January.

On Easter Saturday a song sparrow made a surprise visit in Musgrave Harbour where snow buntings were on the wires and at the feeders.