LOCAL

HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTO

If a coyote is raised near people, it can become too familiar. That leads to bold attacks on domestic pets and other brazen behaviour, say experts.

The wild life wasn't for her

Coyote that was caught, euthanized, was too comfortable in city

BY EMMA REILLY

It's late at night on the Beach Strip. A young coyote slinks through backyards, searching for a meal, from garbage bins, compost piles or a small animal that might wander her way.

Soon, she catches the scent of deer meat. She finds it, dangling inside a metal trap. She steps inside and takes a few paces toward the meat.

As soon as her paws hit a raised platform at the back of the cage, the door clatters shut. She's trapped.

Later, the coyote is transferred to the city's animal control facility on Dartnall Road. She's calm and docile in her crate.

The next day, the coyote is euthanized.

This winter, the Beach Strip was one of the communities in southern Ontario that was confronted with unusually aggressive urban coyotes.

A coyote that killed a chihuahua in Toronto's Beach neighbourhood ignited debate about everything from animal rights to the rural-urban divide. In Peterborough, coyotes attacked two dogs. City officials in Sarnia struggled with controlling the animals after water birds were killed at the Children's Animal Farm in Canatara Park.

Experts say the problem was caused by a cold winter that decimated the animal's food sources. Their appearance in residential neighbourhoods is also evidence of their expanding territory, as coyotes are one of the few animals in the country whose range is getting bigger.

Though the animals are becoming increasingly at home in urban environments, normally they'll keep their distance from humans.

What attracted the animals to the Beach Strip, said Lesley Sampson of Coyote Watch Canada, was food.

When coyote packs disperse in the fall, young animals leaving their mothers will cover a large terrain — often up to 10 kilometres — in search of new hunting territory.

The animals typically hunt in pairs, looking for small mammals, birds or carrion. They're shy of humans and can generally be scared off by as little as a loud noise.

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The Beach Strip isn't a typical habitat for coyotes, who prefer to den in fields, tree stumps or other animal burrows away from any human contact.

But there's plenty to keep them in the area. The Beach Strip offers easy access to the lake, a clear trail leading to a myriad of food sources and close proximity to the shelter of Confederation Park.

And when they learned to associate the area with an easy meal — especially after a long, cold winter — they stuck around.

Sampson thinks the coyotes were initially passing through the area but stayed to feast on garbage, compost heaps, neighbourhood pets and tidbits offered directly from human hands.

As the winter progressed, the animals became more and more brazen. One coyote was spotted walking down the street with a ham in its mouth. The animals, which are usually nocturnal, started napping on residents' porches in broad daylight.

This unnatural behaviour was caused by the animals becoming too accustomed to humans, said Cal Burnett, a supervisor of animal control.

"Normally, if you leave the wildlife alone, they'll act like wildlife," Burnett said.

Once the coyote that was trapped on the Beach Strip learned to associate humans with an easy meal, its fate was sealed.

The city believes the coyote that was killed was causing most of the problems. Complaints died down after it was captured and killed.

The city's Animal Control wanted to relocate the animal to the Aspen Valley Wildlife Sanctuary in the Muskoka area — a move that required special permission from the Ministry of Natural Resources, which only allows wild animals to be relocated within a kilometre of their original habitat.

These regulations are in place for the animal's best interest, said ministry spokesperson Bill Murch. Keeping the animal close to its original habitat increases the chances of a successful transfer.

"We don't want to move a problem situation into a new location," Murch said. "We want the animal to adapt properly and not cause problems."

Moving an animal over large distances also increases the chance of spreading disease, he said.

Taking these factors into consideration, the ministry advised the coyote should be destroyed rather than relocated to the sanctuary.

"It ... had acquired some unacceptable social behaviour," Murch said. "It appears that its behaviour had been modified by interactions with humans."

Even if the animal had been relocated to the animal sanctuary, there was only a slim chance it would have survived, said Bill Dowd, president of Hamilton-based Humane Wildlife Control.

As it was a young, urban coyote that likely never learned to hunt in the wild, the animal would have had a difficult time finding food in the sanctuary.

"Seventy per cent of all relocated animals die," said Dowd. "They're in a strange area where they don't know where the den sites and food sources are.

They also have to compete with other wildlife for food.

The city knew its decision to euthanize the coyote would be met with some anger.

"It's a matter of public safety versus the rights of the animal," said the city's Debbie Spence.

"You're going to get both reactions. Some people have been very thankful and very appreciative. You will get some people who question the process."

The most important thing, Sampson said, is to ensure Hamiltonians are educated about feeding wildlife to ensure this situation doesn't happen again.

"Pointing a finger at somebody does nothing to move forward."

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Bartender tells of stab victim's final moments

BY BARBARA BROWN

A bartender at the Dizzy Weasel bar says she witnessed only five seconds of a shocking chain of events that included the fatal knifings of two young men and the wounding of two other teenagers.

Shannon Bennett, 31, a full-time dental lab technician who works Friday nights at the Barton Street East bar, recounted for a Superior Court jury yesterday the brief scene that took place after midnight on Feb. 17, 2007.

Unknown to the bartender, she was observing the last moments of Paul Haggerty's 19-year life. Bennett watched as he strode purposefully through the bar's east door — followed by his distraught girlfriend Michelle Piccolo — and then walked quickly across the front of her bar toward the west door, which exits onto Avondale Street.

Only seconds before, Haggerty had been standing in the east parking lot where he had been stabbed on the top of his shoulder near his neck. He did not know it then, with his adrenaline still pumping furiously, but two major arteries had been severed and he was rapidly bleeding to death.

"He was walking really fast and she (Piccolo) was chasing him toward the other door," said Bennett.

During questioning by assistant Crown attorney Nancy Flynn, the witness said she did not see any injury to Haggerty and didn't pay him much attention because her attention was fixed on Piccolo.

"She was yelling and screaming. I just remember her being on a phone and she was grabbing him and trying to pull him back. She was very upset," said Bennett.

The bartender said she knew Haggerty because his sister and brother-in-law were regular customers and Haggerty had been to the Dizzy Weasel for several weekends in a row.

Her testimony came yesterday during the fourth week of trial for Corey Christopher Rogers, 24, who has pleaded not guilty to the first-degree murders of Haggerty and of Lucas Deane, 18. He is also on trial for the attempted murder of Kenny Clark, now 20, and an aggravated assault on Lee-Anthony Newell, also 20.

Clark was also stabbed in the parking lot of the bar. Deane and Newell, who had gone for something to eat at the WK Restaurant next door, jumped up from their table and ran outside after learning their friends had been stabbed. The trial has heard Deane was stabbed six or seven times during an alleged confrontation with Rogers on Gage Avenue North. Newell, who tried to pull his friend out of harm's way, was stabbed in the right shoulder.

Earlier in the trial, Piccolo testified that she did not see a knife in Rogers' hand and did not realize Haggerty had been stabbed until after they went back into the bar. Piccolo said her boyfriend appeared a little dazed and she tried to help him walk toward the west door. When they got to the Avondale exit, she reached up and touched his shoulder and was stunned to find her hand covered in his blood.

That evidence appeared to contradict testimony from the bartender. "She had her cellphone in her hand. She was on the phone and she was crying and screaming and at one point fell down. She was screaming and trying to get him to stop," said Bennett.

Rosen suggested Haggerty kept walking "like he had somewhere to go" because he was intent on catching up to his assailant on Avondale Street. Instead, the bleeding man opened the west door and collapsed unconscious on the sidewalk.

The trial continues Monday.

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