

Wildlife in the city

By **M.G. Criscitiello**/ Special To The Tab

Wednesday, December 9, 2005

During the past decade new types of wild creatures have appeared in parks, woodlands and backyards of the city. In addition to the usual skunks, raccoons, squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks, and Canada geese, there are now coyotes, foxes, bobcats, fisher, weasels, river otter, wild turkeys, and an increasingly large white-tailed deer population. Moose have not yet appeared in Newton, but they have had front-page notice in towns nearby, and black bears have reentered the forests of western Massachusetts. Will they be our next big visitors?

Reasons for this change were presented by Colleen Olfenbuttel, staff member of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife www.masswildlife.org, in her Nov. 15 lecture at the Newton Free Library sponsored by the Newton Conservators. She noted that all of these animals were living in the forests of New England when European settlers arrived in the 17th century. They disappeared after the trees were cut for timber and the land cleared for farming. By 1840, much of the soil was exhausted, farming became more difficult, and people moved to richer lands of the Midwest or sought their fortunes in large cities with the coming of the industrial revolution.

Since that time, our forests have returned, and now an estimated 70% of Massachusetts is covered with second growth. This has led to restoration of wild animal populations, with the exception of wolves and mountain lions, entirely extirpated from the Northeast through bounty hunting. As housing has exploded into rural areas, with developments rising in forested landscapes, human encounters with wildlife have increased. Suburban gardens, shrubs, fruit trees, and bird feeders provide tempting food for many wild creatures, and garbage added to mulch piles or left outside in trash bags spells "dinner" for raccoons, skunks and coyotes. Crawl spaces under porches and garages attract these same animals, also foxes, as dens for rearing young. With hunting prohibited, large predators absent, food supplies handy, and living space provided, why should they forego such comforts?

Living with wildlife in our surroundings is a source of pleasure for most Newton residents, but we find some challenges in our attempt to maintain a healthy and happy coexistence with these new species as they return to their rightful domain. In order that they may be protected and continue normal patterns of behavior in the wild, it is important that they not become dependent on humans for food and living space. To underscore this point, Olfenbuttel introduced a discussion of the coyote, displaying a beautiful mounted specimen of the animal. Many who had never seen one in the wild expressed surprise at its relatively small size - its average weight is only 40 pounds.



Coyotes are among the wild creatures in Newton

She described the territorial behavior of the coyote. Its howling and yipping at night are a means of keeping in touch with other members of its group - and a warning to outsiders to stay away! Coyotes are shy and wary by nature, avoiding contact with people. Their diet is varied, and they can be tempted into neighborhoods where food is available. True omnivores, they prey on small mammals such as squirrels and chipmunks, but they also like fruits, berries, and birdseed. They will eat road kill or any pet food or garbage left outdoors. They have been known to run down unprotected small house pets. Owners of cats and little dogs are advised to keep them indoors. (Because house cats, across the nation, kill millions of birds each year, there is further reason to keep them inside!)

To maintain coyotes in their normal wild state, Mass Wildlife suggests the following:

1. Don't feed or try to pet them!
2. Put garbage outdoors in strong containers, not plastic bags
3. Feed pets indoors so unfinished food is not left outside.
4. Don't let cats or small dogs roam freely outside
5. Keep areas under bird feeders clean
6. Close off crawl spaces under porches.

If coyotes become persistent in hanging around, help them to remain wary of humans by scaring them off with loud noises, a bright light, or even water sprayed from a hose if necessary.

Wild turkeys and the Canada Goose are also year-round Newton residents, but these animals will be discussed in another article.

The goal of conservation is to preserve appropriate habitat for those species rejuvenated by the return of our forests, allowing them to live in nature as they were originally born to it. The effort of Mass Wildlife is to reacquaint the public with the particular needs and behaviors of these animals, so they can remain as wild creatures while sharing much of their territory with the human population.

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