

## Humans as Prey

# The Coyote's Truce With Man Broken

By ROBERT A. JONES,  
Times Staff Writer

Some modern coyote stories: A young girl in the city of La Verne walks out her front door on a summer evening. A dozen steps away from her house she spots a lone coyote standing across the street. Their eyes make contact, the young girl runs, the coyote rushes her. She is chased down in a neighbor's backyard and mauled.

In Westlake Village a mother takes her two children into the backyard of their home to play in a sandbox. She leaves the yard for a moment, hears screams, and runs back to see a coyote with its teeth in the midsection of her year-old daughter.

A 17-year-old girl in Pasadena goes to the aid of a dog that lies injured at the side of a street. As she approaches the dog, three coyotes appear and surround her. She is attacked and bitten.

For as long as man has occupied Los Angeles, he has shared the territory with the coyote. For the most part, this intermingling has taken

place amicably—the coyote has retreated peaceably in the face of an ever-advancing city, and he has survived by lingering at the edges of civilization without intruding onto the lands that once were his alone.

But now, for reasons that are little understood, the coyote has begun to push back. Forays into foothill neighborhoods have become common. Garbage cans that once were ignored as food sources now are exploited regularly. Some coyotes make daily rounds down sidewalks. Small dogs and cats have been victimized by the hundreds.

And, most recently, a few victims of these forays have been human. Los Angeles County officials believe this development has taken place only in the last three or four years, and attacks on humans remain relatively rare. But the death of young Kelly Keen from the attack of a single coyote last month in Glendale emphasized what county animal control officials have feared for some time: Coyotes have begun to include man among creatures suitable for prey.

This behavior has startled authorities because until recently here, attacks on humans by coyotes were unknown. In fact, in rural areas of the United States, there have been no verified accounts of attacks on humans by coyotes. And though other southwestern cities also coexist with coyote populations, Los Angeles is the only area known to be experiencing such attacks.

"The urban coyote has become a  
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# COYOTES: Preying on Humans

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different animal from the rural coyote," said Robert Howell, chief of the coyote control program at the Los Angeles County agricultural commissioner's office. "He is raised close to man and he has lost his fear. In the country, you rarely get close enough to a coyote because he is wary of man. Here, one will pass you on the street and look you in the eye."

Howell takes his own case as an example of the modern coyote experience. A resident of the Verdugo Hills for more than a decade, Howell said that in the first five years of his family's residence there, coyotes were rare visitors. Then the change began. Dogs and cats disappeared; garbage cans were raided. The coyotes came out of hiding and presented themselves unafraid.

"Now, you don't dare leave a cat out at night, or a small dog," he said. "When I'm driving to work, many times I have seen the remains of a freshly killed cat and often I recognize the cat. We have learned to live with it and we know that coyotes perform a valuable service as a natural predator. But if I had a small child I would never leave him unattended in my neighborhood."

While the coyote has been the subject of hundreds of scientific studies, virtually all of that attention has been directed toward the rural population. The urban coyote has been largely ignored and thus the changes in its behavior are little understood. Some experts have ventured speculations that the current problem is an outgrowth of crowding of coyote populations by expanding residential communities. Others, such as Howell, believe that the problem is more closely related to the feeding of coyotes by many hillside residents.

According to this theory, feeding of wild coyotes both reduces their fear of man and associates the whole human environment with food. In fact, most of the cases of coyote attacks on humans here can be associated with regular feeding by people in the same area.

In the case of the Keen family, the feeding of several coyotes was a standard practice along their street in the Chevy Chase section of Glendale. Houses on the developed side of the street face a steep, brush-covered hill rising several hundred feet. A group of coyotes would wander down this hill each evening to the pavement across from the homes, waiting for their meal to arrive. It always did.

Though the Keen family rarely participated in the feeding, they enjoyed the presence of the coyotes who seemed a vestige of the wilderness that existed in Chevy Chase canyon before man arrived.

"Some of the animals were even named," Robert Keen said: "one, with a bad leg, was called Gimpy."

Eventually one of Keen's daughters—Jennifer, then 8-years old—went out to feed the coyotes herself. As she attempted to distribute the food evenly, she was bitten on the arm by one of the animals.

It was not a serious attack and though the feeding was stopped in the neighborhood, the coyotes still were regarded as benign visitors. Then, on a sunny, warm afternoon a year later, Robert Keen was working on his car in the driveway while another daughter, Karen, sat nearby. Out of nowhere a coyote charged Karen and bit her on the shoulder. Karen screamed and her father looked up to see the animal slowly retreating across the street. It was Gimpy.

Now alarmed, Keen asked for help from the Glendale Humane So-

cety. Lacking authority to kill the animal, the society set out several cage traps. They failed. Meanwhile, in the Keen neighborhood it was the humans who were beginning to consider themselves the hunted and not the hunters.

One evening Keen's wife, Katherine, was standing with a neighbor and Karen on the sidewalk near their house when they looked up to see a coyote approaching very slowly. It was Gimpy again, this time down on his haunches, taking one step at a time, staring directly at Karen. He was stalking her, trying to pick her off in front of the two adults. Katherine Keen scooped up her daughter while the neighbor protected their retreat and they fled into the house.

On another evening, she was walking home with Karen in a stroller. A coyote appeared from the brush, trotted alongside them, moving toward the daughter. The mother tried to maneuver away and at the same time headed quickly for the garage.

"I didn't know what to do," she said. "I couldn't stop and pick her up because he would have been right on us. I rushed in the garage and slammed the door, hoping there would be only two of us inside, not all three. We made it, but I was terrified."

Robert Keen decided to act on his own. A graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he was familiar with the M-1 carbine. He bought one, practiced briefly at a rifle range, took it home and waited. When Gimpy next appeared, he shot him.

For a brief period, the problem seemed to be solved. By instinct or intelligence, the other coyotes sensed the new danger and did not reappear for several months. When

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