KILLER COYOTES?

Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Back in October 2009, Taylor Mitchell, a 19-year-old rising star, went for a hike to enjoy a beautiful late fall day in Nova Scotia. Mitchell, a folk singer, was nominated for Young Performer of the Year honors by the Canadian Folk Music Awards. She could not have guessed something this serene could go so horribly wrong.

Mitchell was no stranger to the outdoors, as the Ontario native was known as a seasoned naturalist and well-versed in camping and outdoor skills. She was touring the Maritime provinces and found herself with a break between musical gigs and decided to go for a hike in the woods.

She chose the Skyline Trail in Cape Breton Highlands National Park for her hike. The area is very popular among outdoor enthusiasts and is well-traveled. As Mitchell headed up the trail, a pack of coyotes attacked her.

Other hikers witnessed the attack and immediately called 911. She was later airlifted to a hospital in Halifax, where she died about 12 hours later from the wounds she sustained. Besides her distinction as a folk singer, she also became the second person to ever die from a coyote attack in North America.

I paid special attention to this case because of the rarity of fatal coyote attacks against humans and because we tend to overestimate ourselves as a species. I enjoy hunting dangerous game because of the chance you may quickly become the hunted.

Animals that have no fear of humans intrigue me, but I never placed coyotes on that list. The only other confirmed fatal attack involved a child in Southern California during the 1980s.

I have been around coyotes most of my life. My personal interactions with them convinced me they are curious, often coming close to humans to investigate us.

Coyotes are very intelligent creatures. If ranchers and hunters put pressure on them in the daytime, they will become nocturnal. Most coyotes get educated to game calls in a hurry. Once you fool one or two, the others will no longer respond to the calls.

The first inclination for this attack was to claim the animals were sick. In a study of wolf attacks, a high percentage of the wolves were later diagnosed with rabies.

If not rabies in these coyotes, how about distemper? I have seen cases of distemper turn an animal into a crazy, fearless, attacking beast, coming after anything in its path. Although it is doubtful these coyotes were all infected with distemper at the exact same time.

A study by Stanley D. Ghert and Lynsey A. White, published in Human Dimensions of Wildlife, documented 142 reported incidents of coyote attacks on humans in the United States and Canada, involving 159 people.

They found that 37% of the attacks were predatory, and 22% were investigative in nature. The attacks were equally split between adults and children. The predatory attacks are the ones that cause me the most concern.

Stanley Gehrt studied the coyotes in the park where Taylor Mitchell was killed. In a paper published in the Journal of Applied Ecology, he claims the park coyotes had adapted to a limited food supply by learning how to hunt and kill moose, a trait believed to be extraordinary among these smaller-sized carnivores.

"When coyotes grow used to taking a 700-pound animal, and you have a single woman walking by herself, it seems perfectly natural to assume that they simply saw her as a novel food item," Gehrt said in an interview.

He went on to say, "One argument would be that the coyote's ability to survive is tied to their ability to switch from one food source to another. These coyotes were eating a diet completely of moose."

Coyotes in the park resorted to prey-switching because their typical prey, snowshoe hare and white-tailed deer, were in short supply at the time. Moose were the likely target. At least one moose carcass found in the park during the study showed signs of predation. Several live, adult moose were observed with fresh wounds consistent with coyote bites.

I was hunting in Kansas when this coyote came right up to me. I froze, and he got within 3 feet of me, just being curious. I was prepared, just in case he decided to get a little crazy. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

It is important to note the park's coyotes are not subjected to hunting or trapping, which means they don't have any natural fear of humans. Gehrt stressed that the attack on Mitchell was related to the park's unique ecological characteristics that changed over the years. They had conditioned themselves to go after large prey, like moose, and this person all alone was something small.

I have witnessed coyotes bring down a mature-sized mule deer without much trouble, so it stands to reason that a coyote could view a human as suitable-sized prey. Perhaps I have been complacent around coyotes, not giving them much thought as a man-eater.

In recent years, coyotes are more and more prevalent in our urban areas. I see them occasionally in my yard as they search for food, especially during the winter months. As their habitat disappears to "progress," so does the natural supply of prey they live on. When that happens, they turn to alternate food sources, like pets and livestock.

It could only be a matter of time before they look at us as the blue plate special. It is not likely, but something to think about.

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CPW to conduct reclamation project on South Mesa Creek

Special to the MDP

Colorado Parks and Wildlife aquatic biologists will conduct a reclamation project on South Mesa Creek in Montrose County the week of Sept. 16. This project will apply a piscicide called rotenone to the creek along P16 road to remove non-native cutthroat trout.

The purpose of the project is to remove non-native trout to restore native Colorado River cutthroat trout within the creek. CPW crews, with assistance from the Bureau of Land Management, will conduct removal efforts of the non-native fish.

"Yellowstone cutthroat trout were historically stocked into South Mesa Creek where they reproduced with the native Colorado River cutthroat already present in the creek," said Eric Gardunio, CPW area aquatic biologist out of Montrose. "The goal of this project is to remove these hybridized cutthroat trout and restock the creek with native Colorado River cutthroat trout from a nearby drainage. These projects are critical to CPW's goals of conserving native species, and South Mesa Creek offers a great place for our native cutthroat to thrive."

A pure Colorado River cutthroat trout from a creek in Southwest Colorado. (John Livingston/Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

To establish native cutthroat trout habitat in suitable streams, the removal of non-native trout is essential to prevent non-natives from hybridizing with native cutthroat trout. Successfully establishing a population requires removing all the non-native fish before native cutthroat can be stocked.

The removal of non-native fish is done with the use of the EPA-registered piscicide rotenone, an organic chemical that comes from a tropical legume (pea family) root that has been used by indigenous peoples to capture fish and has been used throughout the world for fish management projects. Rotenone only affects gill-breathing animals and invertebrates when used properly.

CPW, as well as other state fish and game agencies, have successfully used rotenone for more than 80 years to remove fish in controlled and targeted reaches of lakes and streams.

Members of the public may see a slight discoloration or a green tint of the water with the presence of an inert dye used to trace water flow during the use of rotenone. Access to South Mesa Creek will be temporarily restricted during the treatment.

CPW has worked on cutthroat trout restoration projects throughout the state for years. Restoration work is done to assure that native trout remain a sustainable and important part of Colorado's natural environment. Colorado River cutthroat trout currently occupy approximately 11% of their historic habitat.

The treated areas will be void of fish until at least next summer when crews will get a chance to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment.