

Coyote Sightings on the Rise

But fear not – they’re a natural part of Lamorinda’s landscape

By Chris Lavin



This coyote was spotted at 7:45 a.m. on Jan. 12 near the upper parking lot of Glorietta Elementary School. Photo Paul Greenstone

Tales have seemed abundant of late: A grandmother sees two coyotes near the trail where she is pushing her grandchild in a stroller, a father snaps a photo of another trotting near the gate of Glorietta Elementary School in Orinda, a big coyote is seen perched in the middle of the road in Canyon, prompting neighbors to

email each other about keeping their cats inside.

Coyote sightings are everywhere throughout Lamorinda, but is it the time of year, or are there actually more coyotes around?

“Absolutely there are more coyotes,” said Kate Marianchild, author of “Secrets of the Oak Woodlands: Plants and Animals

Among California’s Oaks,” published by Heyday Books in 2014. “Coyote populations are on the increase because of the human predation on them.”

And therein lies the irony: Killing a coyote, she says, actually prompts something in the pack’s females to have more pups, “because there is more food available.” So whether they are eating red squirrels or ground squirrels or rats or chickens or cats or little dogs, by eliminating an adult coyote from the pack, it is a yearlong Thanksgiving buffet for the local coyote populations until the reproductive cycle starts again.

“Coyotes are very, very resilient and adaptable animals,” Marianchild said. “They adapt to urban areas quite easily.”

Many times it is the people in areas like Lamorinda who are causing the influx. Coyotes are so much fun to see that people start to feed them and begin to leave out food at their homes, or when hikers or residents see coyotes along a park or trail, they might toss them a bit of sandwich.

“People who see coyotes want to get close,” said Camilla Fox, probably the best local expert on coyotes moving into urban areas. She started Project Coyote in Marin County 20 years ago. She said what people don’t recognize is that the coyote, which has been around since the Pleistocene

Epoch, is a top predator in the area, keeping rats, squirrels and other small mammals in check. It’s a healthy balance, she said.

“There is a whole variety of variables as to why people are seeing more coyotes,” Fox said. “We are right now moving into breeding season so we might be seeing more movement.” With breeding season starting, Fox said it is young adults – probably like the coyote seen at Glorietta Elementary – that are breaking out from the pack and branching out. “It’s not possible to say whether it’s a female or male,” she said about the Glorietta photo, “but it’s probably a young adult.”

And coyotes do, indeed, get into trash when they are hungry. “If people don’t secure their garbage, yes, coyotes and other animals will get into the bins,” Fox said. But the presence of coyotes is a good thing, she said. They help control hanta virus and plague, and other illnesses that exist in the area, by eating rodent populations.

Coyotes will also eat cat or dog food that is left out on porches or decks, or the dogs or cats themselves. “I had a neighbor who lost two cats to coyotes, right off his front porch,” said Bill Swearingen of Burton Valley. “He ended up shooting it. You have to be careful about what kind of gun you use in an urban area.” (The writer of this piece resisted using an exclamation point on that last sentence.) Ac-

ording to Marianchild, shooting a coyote only exacerbates the situation.

Marianchild and Fox both said that instead of luring coyotes in, it is best to keep the animals’ instincts intact. “When you see one, wave your hands or a scarf and yell at them,” Fox said. “That will keep them believing that you are a threat.”

As far as the Moraga grandmother who wrote to this newspaper to report seeing two coyotes in Lafayette near the trail where she was pushing her 4-month-old granddaughter in a stroller, Fox said she probably has nothing to worry about.

“Of course there is reason for concern,” Fox said. “Anybody would be concerned if they had a small child with them.” But she postulates that any aggressive act from a canine in the field may be a hybrid of dog and coyote – the dog part wants to approach people and the coyote part wants to run away.

“Coyotes will be digging their dens soon,” Fox said, so look forward to April. And don’t toss those wild coyotes any sandwiches. Scare them, instead, and watch them run.

More about Kate Marianchild’s wildlife essays can be found at www.katemarianchild.com. Information about Project Coyote can be found at www.projectcoyote.org.

Moraga

Fundamental Shift

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Jay Kerner, CEO of U.S. Realty Partners, the new owner of a large portion of the Rheem Valley Shopping Center, spoke of revitalizing the center into a community and shopping space that everyone will be proud of, adding a central gathering area, indoor and outdoor dining or offering entertainment options.

“We would want the center to provide a social experience, a place to go to be part of an event, a place for a family outing,” he said.

Clark said that she was excited for the opportunity to work with Kerner and his team on initiatives to reinvigorate the Rheem Center. “It’s been a long-standing community goal to improve and revitalize the Rheem Center, and one obstacle has been the willingness of the shopping center owner to engage with the town in that process,” she said.

“We are here to improve the experience,” Kerner said. “This is a great time for retail. We are now getting a lot of inquiries from new local shops and regional tenants that want to start or develop their businesses.”

Presenting a pertinent view of Moraga’s fundamental economic parameters, Clark noted that the town suffers from being away from major transportation, both Highway 24 and BART, and suffers a significant sales tax leakage: only 25 percent of dollars spent by residents are spent in town, but it is not as bad as other neighboring cities, such as Orinda.

Clark noted that Moraga collects half of what Lafayette gets in sales tax per capita, but she noted that Moraga has strengths when considering potential growth of its economy. There are a lot of unmet needs in Moraga. Residents get almost none of their recreation products in town and they spend only 29 percent of their restaurant dollars in town. Also, contrary to other towns, Moraga has available space to

grow, plenty of parking spaces, and attracts many shoppers from out of town to shops like T.J. Maxx.

Kerner said the first order of business was to make sure that the operations at the Center were in order, and that his firm had also started on its marketing plan. “We want to get buy-in from the community,” he said. “We will propose sketches and start a discussion.” He of course warned the community that while his firm had set aside funds to invest in the center, these were not unlimited. He added that he thought that Moraga’s population was large enough for the type of businesses he hoped to bring to town.

Commercial real estate professional Ron Mucovich and Saint Mary’s Economics Professor Kristine Chase also spoke at the symposium. Mucovich noted that commercial real estate in Moraga was in good shape with only an 11.5 percent vacancy rate, and that the town benefited from a relatively low average rent price of \$2 per square foot per month. He added that the retail was suffering from nearby as well as online competition. Chase placed Moraga in the context of the Bay Area and Contra Costa County, explaining that our county may not grow as fast as the peninsula but is producing more long-term stability. In that context, she noted the importance of the college in Moraga’s economics that adds to the stability and also offers an opportunity to diversify the customers’ characteristics.

“Although it’s not realistic to think there’s a silver bullet that’s going to fix everything overnight,” Clark said after the meeting, “there are a lot of practical things we can do, like updating the commercial zoning regulations, that could make a real difference for businesses in the Rheem Center and our other commercial districts. I’m looking forward to it.”

Moraga

2016 Moraga Town Goals

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The residents met with Moraga Police Lt. Jon King, and Chief Bob Priebe, now interim town manager, confirmed that his department would soon come with a cost proposal for the council to make a decision. All agreed at the goal setting meeting to add the cameras to the list of objectives for 2016.

Vice-Mayor Trotter and Councilmember Roger Wykle backed a public suggestion to support building a long-term strategy for the Rheem Theatre. Their request was met by the mayor’s skepticism, as he was not sure there is much the town could do. But Trotter insisted that the goal had both a symbolic and a practical aspect since the town started working with that property owner on a development

agreement. All agreed to add the support of the local theater to the list of 2016 goals.

Some residents had asked that a new off-leash dog rules be studied. Councilmembers remembered the considerable amount of time spent on the topic of a dog park from 2009 to 2012 and unanimously refused to add that goal to their 2016 list. Several residents had also asked that further limits be placed on development. Jill Keimach, who was sitting in the town manager’s seat for the last time, said that the ridgeline and hillside development study should be completed first and that it may be enough to address this concern. No one decided to push that topic any further.

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