

# Willowbrook Wildlife Center in Glen Ellyn, Illinois

*Helping you help wildlife*

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### Living With Coyotes & Red Foxes in Dupage County



Since 1980, 75% of DuPage County's farmland has vanished. At the same time, the human population has risen from around 660,000 to more than 870,000. While this transformation of the landscape has had an impact on many wild species, red foxes and coyotes not only have survived; they have made some startling adjustments.

Prompted by public concern of fox and coyote sightings in residential neighborhoods, The Forest Preserve District of DuPage County's Willowbrook Wildlife Center conducted a study in 1998. The study found that coyotes and red foxes seldom occur in the same neighborhood. The reasons for this are not clear, but differences in travel corridors may be a factor. Foxes are concentrating their activities within ¼ mile of railways, while coyotes show a preference for waterways.

Most people calling Willowbrook are concerned that a coyote or fox represents a threat to their children or pets. The Illinois Department of Resources (IDNR) records indicate only 16 coyote attacks on humans in the past 30 years. The majority of these cases occurred when people tried to hand-feed the animal. In the past 3 years in DuPage County, the only record of a person being bitten by either species was a fox bite that resulted when a boy reached his hand into a den. This is in comparison to over 900 dog bites reported annually in DuPage County.

#### Coyotes

A coyote reminds one of a small German shepherd dog. Coyotes weigh between 20 and 45 pounds, have a bushy tail with a black tip, are yellowish gray with a whitish throat and belly, their ears are prominent, and their tail is held below their back while running.

90% of a coyote's diet is small mammals, but they will also eat birds, snakes, insects, fish, fruit and vegetables. Coyotes are opportunistic hunters, feeding primarily on what is most available: squirrels, voles, mice, rabbits, injured or sick deer. They rarely kill prey larger than themselves, but will scavenge on a fresh carcass. Coyotes are capable of taking a small dog (less than 15 pounds) or a cat, but they rarely take supervised pets.

Coyotes live in prairies, brushy areas, and wooded edges; however, not in heavily wooded areas. They prefer suburban areas with broken forests. Coyotes like to travel along trails/paths or ridges and waterways. They often deposit feces or scent mark with urine along the way. They are mostly active at night, but may be seen during the day, especially in the summer when young are more active. They sometimes hunt in family units, but are more often alone or in male / female pairs.

Their barks and yips usually increase in power and pitch and ending in a long, flat howl. Young have a higher pitch than adults do. Howls increase during mating season, but decrease when they have young. Coyotes can also howl at sirens or whistles. Howls carry 2 –3 miles. Young are born in April and May

in dens found along drainage ditches, fence rows, under abandoned buildings. Young are on their own at 6-9 months.

### **Red Foxes**

Mostly recognized by its long bushy reddish-black tail; red foxes are actually only 8 – 15 pounds, the size of a large cat.

Red foxes prefer forested areas, but are now forced to inhabit urban/suburban areas, especially homes that back up to fields or wood plots. Den sites, which are only used during breeding season for young, are typically found on the sunny side of hills or banks, along a fence row or in a natural rock cavity. Dens have several entrances 8-15" in diameter and can be up to 75' in length. Red Foxes typically have a home range of about 140 acres, in regions with great diversity, but can stretch 3-10 miles. They have been known to travel up to 3 miles each night, but travel less when they have young.

Most foxes feed on rabbits, mice, rats and birds. They make short yaps or barks followed by a single squall; long yells, yowls and screeches. During mating season, the female will shrill and squall and the male answers with 2-3 short barks. They mate in January and February; young are born in March and April. The young will leave the den at about 8-10 weeks and are on their own by late fall.

### **Preventing Problems With Coyotes & Foxes**

*Do not encourage coyotes or foxes by feeding them!*

- Keep pet food and watering dishes inside, especially at night.
- Do not allow spillage to accumulate outside bird feeders.
- Keep grills and barbecues clean. Even the smallest food scraps may attract coyotes or foxes.
- Do not keep garbage cans outside if possible.
- Use welded wire to exclude animals from underneath decks.
- Keep cats indoors.
- Keep small dogs and cats on leashes and stay with your pets while outside, especially during the evening and early morning.
- Coyotes are creatures of habit. If you encounter a coyote the same place and same time while walking your pet, you may want to change your path or time of your walk.

### *Recommended Deterrent Techniques:*

Coyotes and red foxes typically prefer to be as far away from man as possible, because man is a predator. However, loss of habit from man's constant expansion has left them little choice as to where they call home. If a coyote or fox den is in your backyard and you want them to move on, we recommend the following to make them feel uncomfortable and unsafe.

- Place lighting (such as bright flashlights, flood lamp, blinking strands of holiday lights, etc.) in their den. It is best to leave the lights on 24 hours a day. If this is not possible, the lights must be on during the daytime to disturb the animal's sleep.
- Play a radio (portable alarm clock, noisy children's toy, anything that plays music or makes noise repeatedly) either in or near their den. It is best to leave the radio on 24 hours a day. If this is not possible, the radio must be on during the daytime to disturb the animal's sleep.
- Place rags soaked in ammonia in the den for one week. Ammonia has an irritating smell. Over time the ammonia will dissipate and it is important to re-soak the rags on a daily basis. **\*VERY IMPORTANT\*** We do not recommend using ammonia soaked rags during baby season (March

- August). It may injure infant wildlife, which are too young to escape.
- Deterrent techniques should be used for at least 7 – 10 days and it is important to use all the techniques at the same time in order for the deterrents to be successful.
- To determine if the animal has left the den site, wad up newspaper and pack it into the den entrance (also helps hold in ammonia fumes). If they are still using the den, the newspaper will be pulled out. If after a few days the newspaper has not been disturbed, securely repair any access routes. Use welded wire to exclude the animal from underneath decks, elevated sheds, openings under concrete slabs and porches. Secure outside access to crawl spaces. Failure to do so may result in that same animal returning or another animal moving in.

### **Public Health Concerns**

- Coyotes and red foxes are not considered to be a significant source of infectious diseases that can be transmitted to humans. They may be carriers of rabies, although there have been no rabid coyotes or foxes in DuPage County in recent years.

### **What Not To Do**

- Please remember that it is illegal to keep wild animals even for a very short time and that they have specialized nutritional, housing, and handling needs that you are unlikely to be able to provide. Inexperienced individuals who attempt to raise/treat them inevitably produce an unhealthy, tame animal that cannot survive in its natural habitat
- Trapping and removing is illegal without the proper permits and is not always the solution to the problem. Removing the animal creates an open space for another animal. Trapped adults may be leaving young behind to die of starvation in an inaccessible area. Focus on removing the attraction, not the animal
- Never move young from the den. Contact Willowbrook Wildlife Center for advice at (630) 942-6200.
- Do not use poisons. They are inhumane and may be illegal. They can result in secondary poisoning of raptors, wild scavengers and neighborhood pets.

### **When to Contact Willowbrook Wildlife Center**

- If you come across a wild animal and are concerned, leave it alone. Call Willowbrook Wildlife Center at (630) 942-6200 for advice 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM daily. Young wild animals are not like human babies. Their parents do not constantly watch them, and they spend large amounts of time alone or with brothers and sisters.
- Please call Willowbrook Wildlife Center before bringing an animal to the center 9:00 AM – 4:30 PM daily. Call (630) 942-6200.
- Willowbrook is open daily from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, Christmas and New Year's Day.
- If you find an animal with visible wounds and it is after Willowbrook's business hours, please follow the instructions below:
  - Place the animal in a box or animal carrier using heavy gloves, a broom or shovel.
  - Keep in a dark quiet space, away from people & pets.
  - Place a heating pad on low underneath ½ of the box/carrier.
  - Do not feed. Improper food or drink can harm them.