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News

# Coyotes finding new home in downtown Chicago

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Chicago Tribune

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Home-grown coyotes call downtown Chicago home

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**C**oyotes usually try to avoid human contact.

Yet animal experts say an increasing number of coyotes are setting up shop in one of most dense urban labyrinths: downtown Chicago.

The seemingly incongruous marriage between coyotes and a people-packed habitat has occurred naturally, according to Stan Gehrt, an Ohio State University professor who specializes in coyote research in Cook County. Gehrt said he and his team know of no deliberate efforts to release coyotes into the downtown area.

"They're all homegrown coyotes, all born and bred in Chicago," Gehrt said.

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Gehrt, who runs the Urban Coyote Research program, said the coyote population swelled tenfold during the 1990s. Coyotes are very territorial and only will tolerate so many living in a certain area. So some animals simply were pushed out of the suburbs and had no option but to live in the city, without the benefits of the wooded areas and semihidden corridors they favor.

Gehrt estimates that around 2,000 coyotes call downtown Chicago home, but it's likely more than that. He says they are thriving in what was considered a less-than-ideal living situation.

"Once they got there, they experienced higher reproduction, more food, and so now they have no reason to leave," he said. "People think animals living in that habitat are less fit or sick, and the opposite is actually true."

Part of the reason for their success in the city is innate: coyotes are very adaptable animals. Recent research funded by a National Geographic committee allowed Gehrt and his team to outfit six coyotes with cameras and observe their behavior. The footage revealed coyotes astutely waiting on passing cars so they could safely cross streets, using sidewalks and other walkways, and even raising a litter of coyote pups in the top of a parking deck.

Not that residents typically would see the creatures, similar in size to dogs. Coyotes are nocturnal and likely would be seen only when moving around to catch food, according to the Humane Society of the United States.

But by being out of the suburbs and rural areas, coyotes are safe from two major threats: trapping and hunting.

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"As long as they don't get hit by a car, they actually can live for a pretty long time," Gehrt said.

So far, Gehrt says, the risk of coyotes living close to so many humans is minimal. But he and his researchers want to monitor their behavior in coming years to see whether these ultraversatile animals ever get a little too comfortable being around people. They also are examining whether aggressive or shy coyotes are better at surviving downtown — the idea of natural selection.

In the meantime, experts say there is one easy way to keep coyotes at bay.

"Don't feed them, especially if you don't want them to be living in your area," Gehrt said. "If you have people feeding coyotes, that could accelerate any behavioral changes."

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