



Five Coyote Draw

Panic ripped through the city. The face of a small, trepid boy filled every local television screen in Phoenix; the news of the attack on him and the high speed chase that followed seized the city in a drama more typical of late night programming. Five media helicopters hovered above as the officers, in an O.J. Simpson-style pursuit, attempted to apprehend the suspect. The afternoon news detailed the gunshots that ultimately took him down in an open field. But the event had a twist. The accused was not a human... it was a coyote. Its mate, a nursing female, was captured and destroyed as well.

As an on-camera naturalist for the zoo, I spent that day with reporters, traveling from station to station, struggling to give some insight into a bad situation. Two young children, living only blocks apart had been nipped or scratched by what parents believed was a coyote and with emotions in high swing, the battle to understand these secretive creatures became a sudden, pressing issue.

Coyotes have inhabited these lands for thousands of years. A shy and reclusive member of the canine family, they manage to endure urban sprawl because of their amazing ability to adapt to changing environments. They are primarily carnivores, but not picky ones and can supplement their diet with carrion and insects, as well as fruits and grasses, not to mention hand-outs and refuse, if available.

Standing only about three and a half feet tall and sporting a tawny coat over a thin, athletic frame, the coyote is notoriously mistaken for a scrawny Sheppard mix. Perhaps it is this resemblance to its domestic counterpart that encourages people to put food out for the 'poor, skinny things'. In truth, its lean shape is advantageous for its lifestyle, making it a strong long-distance wanderer (traveling up to 400 miles) and quick to the chase (with a sprinting speed of up to 40mph). Besides, offering food to a wild animal may diminish its natural fear of humans and lead to misunderstandings and confrontations like the one that left the two animals dead on that April day.

As that warm spring night settled peacefully over the city, and the entire story began to fade into the blur of current events, five other victims were discovered in the wake. Two-week old pups lay eyes-closed in their tight, dirt packed den, awaiting the return of their parents whose care they would require for several more months.

When I learned of the babies, I called a friend at the rehabilitation center where they'd been taken. I was told that officials had been led to the den and the helpless infants had been quietly transported to the sanctuary for care. It was at that remote location that the pups began their journey to adulthood.

We all knew the routine. If the young coyotes could be raised to survive in the wild, they would be releasable. Every possible measure was taken by volunteers to assure that the pups related not to humans, but to their coyote foster parents who would teach them the skills necessary to make it out on their own.

During the scorching heat of summer, the babies became juveniles. Their legs stretched long and their eyes turned amber. Silly puppy play was replaced with poise and wariness, and they learned to hunt. Soon the coming of fall pushed the sun to the south; the night air turned chilly and in its breezes stood five beautiful, healthy sub-adult coyotes.

The air was cool and crisp. A fresh rain had rinsed the landscape and mountains accented the horizon as our vehicles bounced along the unfamiliar dirt road. I had accepted an invitation from the rehab center to help release a total of 22 coyotes (and a bobcat) and was excited to discover that those five orphans were among them. As we turned the engines off, the animals crated in the back of the van unknowingly spent their final moments in captivity.

Following a solid hike up into the uninhabited hillside with the carriers, we opened the doors without fanfare. Our small group stepped back and stood silently. Nothing happened. Apparently the coyotes didn't realize this was their exit cue, so we gently coaxed them out by tipping the crates from behind. With a burst, the brothers and sisters darted from the crates and headed into the heavy green growth. In a moment they were gone.

I still think of those coyotes now and then. I wonder if they are alive. Healthy? And if, perhaps, they have produced offspring of their own. For now they are sheltered from human interaction, but as we move our homes further and further into undeveloped terrain, we will continue to displace wildlife. And those animals, in their struggle to survive, will ask us for patience, understanding and a bit of undisturbed space in which they can create an existence for their family. I can only hope we will oblige.