

Predator vs. Predator

June 2009 Talk of Maine

BY: ROBERTA SCRUGGS

Much of Maine's wildlife goes its way without much notice. There's no opossum lobby. Skunks are a nuisance, but not a cause. No one tries to count the voles, or argues about how accurate the vole census is or worries about how many voles survive each winter.

But coyotes can't stay out of the limelight because their fate is entwined with the whitetailed deer, which is in a class by itself when it comes to human concern and intervention. Deer do, in fact, have a lobby — Maine's roughly 135,000 deer hunters — and a state agency — Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (IF&W) — which has devoted much of its resources to deer since it was created in 1850.

"Mainers started calling coyotes a problem in the 1960s," says Josh Johnson, 23, of Kennebunk, who literally hunts coyotes in his own backyard. "Well, we're almost fifty years down the road, and I haven't seen anything progressing to stop what they're calling a problem."

Yet coyotes have supporters, too, now that the role of predators is better understood and wildlife watchers outnumber hunters by a wide margin in Maine and across the nation.

Killing coyotes may be an act of faith in the hunting community, but to others "it's not viable biologically or economically," says Jym St. Pierre, director of RESTORE: The North Woods, a nonprofit organization devoted to restoring damaged ecosystems, degraded habitats, and native wildlife. "I don't see that there's any stomach for it from the public. If the state of Maine substantially increased efforts to kill coyotes to help the deer population or because more people think it's fun or any number of other reasons, I don't think people would stand for it."

A series of Maine task forces, study groups, and commissions have worked diligently, yet fruitlessly, to resolve the coyote conflict. But three hard facts — the coyotes' resilience, the federal protection for Canada lynx under the Endangered Species Act, and the greater impact of severe winters and habitat loss on deer — have made hunters eager to help deer. They can't do much about habitat, at least in the short term. But they can kill coyotes.

"Without being able to do something to control coyotes, I don't see much of a future for our deer here in northern Maine," says Leo Kieffer, of Caribou, a former state senator.

The winter of 2007-2008 was the third worst for deer on record. Then last fall Maine hunters killed fewer deer (21,061 total) than they had in a quarter century, including just 762 in all of Aroostook County. The winter of 2008-2009 was only marginally better for whitetails. So although deer populations rebounded somewhat in southern and central Maine, they're still struggling up north, Down East, and in the western mountains.

"I am very, very concerned that the northern deer population is actually in danger of being extirpated," says Gerry Lavigne, a former state wildlife biologist who watched over the deer herd

for thirty years.

Whitetailed deer are at the far northern end of their range in Maine. When the winters are moderate, deer can thrive. But long winters with heavy snow can devastate the herd. Another factor is lack of mobility. Unlike their cousins, moose and woodland caribou (formally native to Maine), deer are ill-equipped by their small hooves to run in deep snow. When deer can't move easily, they can't find enough food and become easy prey for predators. Even during a moderate winter about 10 percent of Maine's deer die; in a severe winter, 30 percent or more will perish.

Coyotes didn't migrate into the state until the 1930s and weren't numerous until the 1960s. But even before coyotes' arrival, the deer population prospered on a cyclical basis, booming only until the next severe winter. In 1899, hunters were happy to kill 7,870 deer — about a third of the 2008 harvest — because hunting was banned in Maine's eight southernmost counties. Another population crash came after a harsh winter in 1903-04, and losses after 1933-34 are estimated at 40 percent. That boom-and-bust cycle has and will go on no matter how many coyotes are killed.

"It's not just a simple thing of a dead coyote equals a saved deer," says biologist Wally Jakubas, leader of IF&W's mammal group.

Of course, hunters are predators, too. So since the first deer season was set in 1830, the state has long tried to stabilize the deer population by controlling hunting. It's tried different hunting zones, season lengths, and bag limits, and outlawed methods such as night hunting or hunting with dogs. Since 1986, the major management tool has been the any-deer permit system, which regulates how many does are killed. Lavigne, who retired in 2005, created the permit system, but concludes that restricting harvest hasn't been enough.

He calls IF&W's efforts to control coyotes "lackluster." Many deer hunters aren't so polite. They're convinced IF&W isn't trying hard enough to find some way around the federal ban on snaring and restrictions on trapping, which are intended to protect lynx. Snares are effective, in part because they don't have to be checked every twenty-four hours as traps do to prevent animals from suffering. Snaring usually is lethal immediately — the wire strangles the coyote or other animal. If an area isn't disturbed as frequently, there's less chance human scent will scare a coyote away.

So Lavigne is hoping to tap into hunters' concerns and convince them to take coyote control into their own hands. What was critically missing with the snaring program, he says, was that it wasn't widespread. Every town in Maine has deer hunters. "If just 4 or 5 percent of them decided to hunt coyotes, that's five thousand people," Lavigne says. "If they only killed two coyotes a piece, and they do it at the right time of the year, you would annually reduce coyotes at a time when deer are vulnerable."

It sounds simple, but it isn't. Coyote control never is. Like wolves, coyotes have been hunted, trapped, and poisoned in large numbers. But unlike wolves, they require no restoration. Perhaps the best word to describe coyotes is "opportunistic." They eat almost anything, from berries to birds to house cats, and they're thriving across the continent, including big cities — Chicago's estimated coyote population is two thousand.

Coyotes probably migrated into the Pine Tree State from Canada. By the end of 1970s, they'd

established themselves everywhere, about a half dozen coyotes for every seventeen square miles of Maine. The population is estimated from 10,000 to 17,000, depending on the time of year.

In a 1995 report, Lavigne estimated that to suppress the population about 70 percent of Maine's coyotes would have to be killed annually — 7,000 to 11,000 — a level of coyote removal never achieved out West, even when poisons were legal. Now, however, Lavigne says he's reevaluated the research. "The bottom line is that working with natural mortality of coyotes during the summer, then going to our trapping season, and then beginning coyote control in early winter, we can reduce coyote density," Lavigne says. "And I think the snaring program demonstrated that on a limited scale."

State biologist Jakubas isn't convinced. Maine trappers kill about two thousand coyotes a year. When coyotes could still be snared, there were about forty to fifty people snaring coyotes statewide and even at the peak of their effort, they only killed about six hundred coyotes a year. That might have had an impact in specific deer yards, he says, but "there really isn't any evidence one way or the other that snaring had any beneficial effect."

It's difficult to know how many coyotes are shot because, unlike deer or bears, they don't have to be registered at a game inspection station. But Maine has roughly three thousand deer yards. Having even a temporary impact on one deer yard would require a big commitment. Jakubas wonders how many hunters would volunteer to spend nights outdoors from January through March, especially in northern Maine.

"You need constant pressure on the deer yards [to protect them]," Jakubas says. "It's not good enough to go in there and kill twenty coyotes in January and expect that's going to solve the problem for the winter, because there are other coyotes that can move into those areas."

Coyotes are hunted much like bears are, lured with piles of bait (meat, not doughnuts), or tracked with packs of dogs. Hunters also call coyotes with devices that mimic the sound of rabbits in distress. But coyotes really are wily, a fact for which people can take some credit or blame.

"There's quite a bit of evidence that shows all of this coyote control that's been going on in the West has kind of selected — I'm talking about natural selection — for the more intelligent coyotes," Jakubas says.

By baiting and calling, Josh Johnson and his hunting partner, Ben Marquis, have shot a total of forty coyotes over the past four winters in Kennebunk and Arundel. They've found coyotes are most active from 11 p.m. to 3 a.m. They often hunt by moonlight, but Johnson also has a small battery-powered spotlight clamped to the scope of his rifle. Some coyote hunters use night-vision scopes and some even plant solar landscaping lights near their bait piles.

Ask Johnson if his efforts have helped the deer population and he answers, "I'm not sure, to be honest with you." Yet he's still convinced that "we've got to get the ball rolling and get the word out and try to take as many as we possibly can. I don't think we'll ever take enough, but the more the merrier."

One innovative, but controversial way of promoting coyote hunting is the annual Coyote Photo Contest at mainecoyote.com. The contest accepts photos of dead coyotes from anywhere in the nation, as long as they're legally harvested for cash prizes. Web site owner Steve Beckwith has

banned entries that show live coyotes in traps and if hunters send in very bloody photos, “I usually will use Photoshop to doctor up the gore before posting them,” he says in an e-mail.

Yet even if Beckwith and Johnson could mobilize hunters to kill more coyotes, they might be focusing on the wrong predator. Black bears also eat deer, but with bear hunting a thriving part of Maine’s economy, no one is suggesting controlling their population. Still, studies across North America have pointed to black bears as the greatest predator on fawns, Jakubas says, and recent Minnesota research showed bears, bobcats, and wolves all took more fawns than coyotes.

Add it all up and coyote control looks like a long shot. Nevertheless, Lavigne believes deer hunters can kill more coyotes and that they will.

“My target audience is not the scientific community,” Lavigne says. “My target audience is the deer hunters out there who want to do something, and they’re not going to be discouraged.”