

What To Do If You Encounter A Coyote While Walking Your Dog

By far, the biggest source of conflict between urban coyotes and humans centers around pets.

By Jaymi Heimbuch

Many urban residents see coyotes or have interactions with coyotes while out walking their dog. Coyotes are rarely interested in humans, but add a dog to the mix and their interest is piqued. Larger dogs may be viewed as competition or threat, while smaller dogs may be viewed as potential prey.

When it comes to urban coyotes, what most parks officials will tell you is that keeping the peace isn't about managing coyotes, it's about managing people. If urban residents know what to expect and how to alter their behavior to avoid interactions with coyotes, conflicts can be dramatically reduced.

Four basic rules for walking dogs in coyote territory

- 1.** Keep your dog on a 6-foot leash. This length is long enough to let your dog have some freedom but not so long that you can't easily control your dog should you need to, especially at a moment's notice. Retractable leashes are of little help to a dog owner, since it is very difficult to reel your dog back in if they are pulling on a long line way ahead of you.
- 2.** Avoid areas known to have coyote activity, especially during breeding and pupping season. If there are signs posted or you've heard neighbors report coyotes sighted in a certain area, make the common-sense decision to avoid walking your dog in those areas. This is especially important during pupping season when mother and father coyotes will be more defensive of their den sites.
- 3.** Stick to trails and open paths, and avoid areas with thick brush. Going off trail, following game trails, or heading into areas where there is thick brush lining the path increases your chances of running into a coyote. Staying on trail in open areas gives you plenty of time to spot and react to a coyote.
- 4.** Avoid walking your dog at sunrise and sunset hours. Coyotes are naturally active during the day, though urban coyotes usually switch to nocturnal behavior. Either way, they are often active at twilight hours. If you're walking your dog during sunrise or sunset, be aware that it increases your chances of an interaction with a coyote.

If you follow these simple rules, you're way ahead of the game in enjoying a quiet walk with your dog with little chance of seeing, let alone interacting with a coyote. Truly, the most important rule is simply following all leash laws. Even if there is an area of open space where dogs are allowed off leash, unleash your dog **ONLY** if your dog has a solid and

reliable recall. This simple behavior alone would send the number of dog-coyote conflicts plummeting.

Unfortunately, not everyone is going to abide by leash laws, nor will many people stop using retractable leashes that allow a small dog to wander a dozen feet or more away from their owner — far enough for a coyote to feel minimal threat from a human while eying the small dog as a possible meal. Large natural areas that welcome off-leash dogs are also welcoming to coyotes, and thus create the possibility for dog-coyote interactions and conflict.

In these areas and situations with a higher likelihood of running into coyotes, it is important to know what to do if you come across one.

What to do if you and your dog encounter a coyote

- 1. Leash your dog. Pick up and carry small dogs.** It is important to have full control over your dog so that they do not run toward, away from, or otherwise engage the coyote.
- 2. Stand tall and assertive.** Coyotes are wary of humans and your presence is usually enough to drive off a coyote. Maintain eye contact. Do not turn your back on the coyote and do not run. Running away can trigger a coyote's prey drive and may cause him or her to chase you.
- 3. Haze the coyote until it leaves the area.** This may come easy to some but to others seem abusive or unkind. But every coyote advocate will agree, the kindest thing you can do for a coyote is to scare it away, especially if he or she is overly curious about dogs. Keeping up a coyote's natural fear of humans is the only way to keep urban coyotes alive, for a coyote that becomes too brazen is sure to end up euthanized.

Outside of pupping season (between the months of August and January) haze the coyote by yelling, stomping your feet, shaking a jacket or noise maker, popping an umbrella, flashing a flashlight, tossing rocks or branches at the ground near the coyote and anything else that will frighten the coyote off. If the coyote freezes, or runs a little way away and turns to watch you again, continue hazing and moving toward the coyote until he or she leaves the area entirely. Then calmly and assertively walk out of the area.

If it is breeding and pupping season (between the months of February and July) you may be near a den and considered a threat. It is important not to haze coyotes as normal, because coyotes will defend their den site and you'll only be escalating a situation, causing undue stress on the coyote and potentially forcing a coyote to act out defensively. During these months, the best thing to do is to slowly and calmly walk away without ever turning your back on the coyote. Stay tall and assertive as you leave the area, even if it means walking backwards. Coyotes will sometimes follow you for a distance to escort you out of their territory, and turning your back may invite them to come in closer to hurry you on your way. Maintaining eye contact and an assertive posture keeps things balanced by letting the

coyote know they do not have the upper hand while still respecting the coyotes defense of their den site.

4. Report overly brazen coyotes. If a coyote comes too close, follows you for too long, acts overly assertive or does not respond to hazing, report the coyote to city authorities. The coyote may have become habituated to humans or is being fed by someone, which can result in aggressive behavior. It may be that the coyote can be hazed by city officials to reverse its behavior or, as unfortunately is often the case, may have to be removed.

Keeping your dog leashed during walks is a smart safety strategy in general, and particularly when walking through an area with coyote activity.



The best way to avoid conflict between your dog and a coyote is to stay vigilant and know how to react when you see one. © Jaymi Heimbuch / Urban Coyote Initiative

The media is rather one-sided when it comes to coyotes, reporting with sensationalistic fervor all the instances that coyotes have conflicts with pets, but ignoring the instances where an encounter is harmless, or a coyote is actually defending itself or territory against an intruding dog, rather than being the aggressor. This results in myths and misconceptions about life among coyotes.

While there can be misunderstanding about what is happening during an encounter, what is readily apparent is that the best thing for humans, dogs and coyotes living in the same area is to minimize the possibility of an encounter. Play your role in maintaining a coyote's fear of humans, and by extension, maintaining distance from pets.

More ways to keep your pet safe

In addition to knowing what to do when your dog is on leash, you can also take steps to keep coyotes away from your neighborhood and your pets safe at home. These steps include:

- Do not let your pet outside alone, especially at night.
- Do not keep pet food outside.
- Haze coyotes every time you see them, regardless of if you have a pet with you (unless it is during pupping season).
- Avoid having any attractants in your yard, which means picking up fallen fruit from trees, cleaning the BBQ grill, securing lids on trash cans, covering your compost piles, and removing anything else that might be a food, water, or shelter source for coyotes.