



The Eastern Coyote

ONE MAN'S LIFE WORK **STORY BY CHRISTINA RUSSO PHOTO BY JON WAY**

Biologist Jon Way is sure the coyotes were deliberately poisoned. Way and his colleagues had been radio-tracking the family of three—Jet, Maeve, and their pup Cour—without incident for 12 months in Everett, Massachusetts, a working-class city just north of Boston. In late March 2005, however, the coyotes' consistent movements became restricted. It was clear that something was wrong. "We couldn't do anything about it because they were wild animals and they wouldn't let us near them," Way laments.

Mother Maeve was the first to be found: dead in a cemetery on Easter Sunday. Her mate Jet stopped moving for 24 hours and four days later was discovered in a swamp. Cour, their 11-month-old son, drowned in a shallow brook that he had previously crossed dozens of times. All three died within a week.

Although deeply affected by the experience—"It took us six months to recover," says Way—the 32-year-old re-

searcher wasn't exactly surprised. Coyotes are supremely adaptable, opportunistic predators with a broad diet that includes live prey, carrion, garbage, insects, and fruit. Since they were first spotted in western Massachusetts in 1957, coyotes have stitched themselves into every kind of community, from rural clearings dotted with McMansions to predictable suburban neighborhoods to restless urban streets. More and more, the lives of coyotes and people are intersecting. And in many instances, humans have little tolerance for this clever animal, which took advantage of the virtual extermination of the gray wolf—a competitor and predator—to expand its range throughout the United States (see "Prairie Wolf in the Palmettos," February 2007).

In the case of the coyote family in Everett, the necropsy report confirmed that all three members had digested a significant amount of brodifacoum, an active ingredient in rat poison.

"Most people have a misperception about coyotes," says Way. "They see them as vermin. They see them as an inconvenience. And they see them as evil." The bottom line: The mere howling of a coyote can jumpstart peoples' fears that a pet or a child will be attacked.

Way wants to change those attitudes. He wants the public and wildlife management officials to respect this highly intelligent, social creature. To that end, he has been diligently tracking coyotes in Massachusetts to better understand their behavior and disseminate what he believes is more accurate—and arguably more sympathetic—information.

Way's kinship with the coyote was sparked in the late 1980s at Barnstable High School on Cape Cod, during a science class field trip. On the outing, his assignment was to study the habits of white-tailed deer. Instead, he unexpected-

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ly found himself face to face with a coyote. "He came out of the clearing and stared at me for what seemed like ten minutes. In reality, it was probably only two or three minutes, but it was amazing. He made no noise. It seemed like he was floating on grass," recalls Way.

Inspired by the encounter, Way began studying eastern coyotes while obtaining a masters degree in science at The University of Connecticut/Storrs in the late 1990s. He launched a project to box-trap, radio-collar, and track coyotes in Barnstable. This was no easy feat: Coyotes are savvy, shy, and elusive.

Throughout his PhD studies in science education at Boston College, Way continued to track coyotes. As a fervent believer in the power of education (Way now teaches ecology at Barnstable High School), he enlisted students to aid his research. He also decided that he would track "city coyotes." Previously, few researchers had studied eastern coyotes, and there had been no studies of urban coyotes in eastern North America.

"The unique part of doing a suburban/urban study is that we are gathering data close to people, to show how the coyotes live around us," says Way. "This goes back to biology. For instance, why does it seem that coyotes are everywhere? It is actually because they move vast distances on a nightly basis, covering ten to twelve miles. And they live at low densities, which means there are not nearly as many

coyotes as people think. So, practical management opportunities can directly come out of research."

Filling out—with science—what Way perceives as a low profile of the coyote is his working goal. Recently, the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife extended the state's coyote hunting season, which has no bag limit, and voted to allow Problem Animal Control agents to shoot coyotes if deemed necessary. Way is on record vehemently disagreeing with both decisions. "These animals are personable, social, sentient animals. The old-school wildlife view is 'What is the problem if they are breeding and can compensate for being killed?' But just because they can reproduce doesn't mean they don't feel the loss of a mate. If the mate is theirs for four or five years and then it is shot, trapped, or snared, I think it is almost a joke if you don't think those animals feel loss."

Way believes all states should have a strict bag limit on coyotes. This is in line with his general philosophy that if wildlife officials make decisions that show the coyote has value, the public will too.

It may be a long battle. Of the 40 coyotes Way has collared over

the last 10 years, only 5 are still alive. The others were killed in collisions with automobiles, shot by hunters, or have simply disappeared. Way knows that his work and high opinion of the coyote aren't always popular. He has received personal threats as well as threats directed at his study animals. "Some people on Cape Cod have sent me letters saying they have poisoned my coyotes, or informing me of their intentions to lure one of my coyotes to swallow a fish hook baited with meat. Some people think they are bigger and badder because they can kill an animal. I think the ultimate sign of a real person is to learn how to live with these animals and adapt with them."

Way travels 10,000 to 20,000 miles a year on the trail of coyotes. Although they aren't specifically nocturnal, in densely populated areas, coyotes strategically search for food at times when they are less likely to encounter people. That means it's usually early morning or dusk when Way gathers his radiotelemetry gear, jumps into his 1997 cherry red Toyota pickup, and goes in search of his quarry. "I love doing this. Whenever I'm up at midnight or one in the morning, and I'm just super burnt-out or not much is happening, the second I see a coyote, it is all worthwhile."

Way has written a book, *Suburban Howls*, about his experiences. Cash for gas comes out of his own pocket, and he lives with his parents and grandparents on Cape Cod to save money. Way's long-term goal is to build an eastern coyote research center in Barnstable. He plans on studying eastern coyotes for the rest of his life.

Opposite, top: Biologist Jon Way hand-reared Lupe, an eastern coyote, as part of a behavioral study that enriches his radio-tracking research in an urbanized region of eastern Massachusetts.

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