

Deer, wolves and coyotes, oh my

By Sarah Sobanski

Bancroft This Week's Melissa Armstrong came into the office a few weeks ago and, holding out her phone, asked, "Want to see a picture of what I woke up to this morning?"

It was a picture of a deer slain by predators in her back yard. They came back for what was left the next night.

Last week, pictures of a second slain deer near a schoolyard were circulating on Facebook. Many of the people I followed up with said they had seen fewer deer and more wolves or coyotes in the area as the years passed.

While I hold to wolves will be wolves as it were - food is scarce in the winter. Animals might be prone to come a little further out of the woods to sustain themselves. It might be time to discuss wolf/coyote safety.

Wolves won't typically engage with humans, they're shy. They keep to themselves except for with those of their own kind. "Wolves are social animals," according to tips provided to *This Week* by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. "They not only hunt in packs or groups but live most of their lives with other wolves. Wolf packs will reuse den sites over multiple years."

According to the International Wolf Centre, packs can range from two to 30 wolves, though the average size of a pack is five to eight. Usually they're families made up of a mom, a dad and their pups "from the last few years."

So if you see one, there are probably others close by. Remember, "wolves are territorial. Each pack occupies an area that it will defend against intruders. Sizes of territories vary greatly depending on the kind and abundance of prey available."

As with much of nature, preventative action is the best way to ensure you don't disrupt the area's ecosystem or its food chain. The ministry recommends keeping pet food indoors and pet waste out of compost containers - as well as meat, milk or eggs. Other waste should be stored in "durable plastic containers with locking lids" and kept inside until collection day.

Don't feed the predators or the prey. One of my interview subjects said he knew friends who fed deer in the area. He said two years ago the herd they fed was triple what it is now.

While the ministry maintains that both wolf and deer populations are stable in the Bancroft area, ensuring spaces where wildlife populations have easy access to food can consolidate herbivores attracting carnivores.

The ministry recommends removing deer food and salt blocks from your property. It says to make it unwelcoming by "removing small mammal habitats such as rock piles, the wood of debris."

You can also fence your property "with a two-meter high fence that extends at least 20 centimeters underground" and "install a roller system that can be attached to the top of your fence preventing animals from gaining the foothold they need to pull themselves up and over the top of a fence." You should also "close off crawl spaces under porches, decks, and sheds." If your crawl space is damaged, leading to animals being able to make their way in, you will need to get that fixed as quickly as possible before blocking it off. Using services such as the Crawlspace Medic, amongst others, will help get this together in enough time.

If you've done all this and still you run into a wolf, the MNRF asks you use lethal action as a last resort. Never approach touch or try to tame a wolf.

The MNRF says, "Do not turn your back on, or run from, a wolf. Back away from the animal while remaining calm. Stand tall, wave your hands and make lots of noise."

You can also use whistles, personal alarm devices and lights to scare off wolves, such as a flashlight.

If worse comes to worst, "a landowner may humanely kill or trap wolves that are damaging or about to damage their property.

Firearm regulations and bylaws must be followed. Landowners in central and northern Ontario must report wolves killed in protection of property to their local Ministry of Natural Resources office. You may also hire an agent to act on your behalf."

Wolves are amazing creatures native to northern Ontario. According to the ministry, "They are an important part of our ecosystem and contribute to Ontario's rich biodiversity. The presence of wolves is a good indication that our natural spaces are healthy."

We live in the north to be closer to the great outdoors, not to control it. While wolf sightings can be unsettling, wolves aren't suddenly infringing on our territories. Our lands have always been their homes.

Let's keep wolves a part of our lives by erring on the side of caution and respecting Mother Nature.