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Maine's War on Coyotes

The state's predator-control program is ill conceived, ineffective, and inhumane. What's more, it has turned an enlightened resource agency and its talented staff of wildlife professionals into a national laughingstock.

By Ted Williams

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In my meadow—in back of the computer screen, amid lupine, phlox, high grass, and bluebird boxes—things happen that make writing difficult. On a summer morning a wild canid, sleek coat gleaming in the sun, leaps high, twists, swats the ground with huge forepaws. He is well muscled but, in late puppyhood, still gawky and playing as much as seriously hunting mice. His race, maybe not new but newly noticed, first got the attention of humans about 60 years ago. It has been called "coy dog," "coy wolf," "new wolf," "brush wolf," and, now, "eastern coyote."

The "coyote" part is misleading. Eastern coyotes are larger, heavier-set, and much more wolflike than their western cousins. They possess wolf genes, so maybe they interbred with wolves on their way east. Or maybe they were here all along, identified as small wolves whenever they were shot, trapped, or poisoned by the many people who hated them. When moonlight washes hardwood ridges, I like to howl at eastern coyotes; they answer me, then embark on prolonged conversations among themselves. Unfortunately for midlevel plant communities, shrub-nesting birds, and my wife's tulips, they kill very few deer in central New England.

They kill more deer in Maine, but not enough to limit the population, which has been growing for 20 years. Maine is the only state that sees fit to hire eastern-coyote-control agents for the alleged benefit of deer hunters, and one of the few states south of Alaska that still believes it's desirable or even possible to make more game by knocking off predators. Unlike wolves, eastern coyotes prefer low-energy pursuit. They'll take deer when varying hare (their favorite prey) are scarce or when they can do so safely and economically, as when the snow is deep and crusted and the deer are "yarded up" in thick conifers. But in the colder regions, where deer haven't been increasing, the limiting factor is poor winter habitat, not coyotes.

In June 1980, on my first assignment for Audubon, I joined a team from Maine's Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit and followed radio-collared eastern coyotes around Maine's western mountains. As far as the unit had been able to determine, in nine months 41 animals had killed zero deer. There had been deer hair in the scats, but in almost every case the researchers had been able to pinpoint the source: carrion. Documented stomach or scat contents had included varying hare, butterflies, beetles, grasshoppers, berries, apples, offal, fish, voles, aluminum foil, rope, leaves, leather, dog food, and dog-food bags. That year eastern coyotes made it onto the Maine Republican platform, where they were identified as one of just three environmental ills worthy of the party's consideration (the others being antipesticide sentiment and unfair property taxes).

At least with coyotes there was bipartisan agreement. When I had finished my work in the woods, I stopped by Augusta to visit Glenn Manuel, the father of eastern-coyote control. For helping get the state's Democratic governor elected, Manuel, a former state senator, had been appointed commissioner of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. He told me that coyotes threatened to eliminate Maine's deer herd and scoffed at his biologists who claimed otherwise. "[They] still believe in the balance of nature," he declared. "They're textbook boys." Later, without a shred of documentation, he publicly announced that "many does are found dead, but only the unborn fawn is eaten" and lamented that coyote snares were illegal. Even as commissioner, Manuel ardently supported the Dickey-Lincoln dams project, which would have destroyed 130,000 acres of

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habitat for deer and other wildlife, 268 miles of free-flowing trout water, and 30 wilderness ponds. And when he chaired a public meeting to consider reintroducing wildlife that had been extirpated from Maine, his biologists hid behind their clipboards when he urged them to "bring back" penguins.

Manuel, to borrow lyrics from folksinger Tom Rush, would have killed "a thousand coyotes, if [he] could only just find one." In 1980, the first full year of the control program he designed, the entire Maine warden force "controlled" three animals. But five years later the state legislature ordered the department to kill coyotes, authorizing it to hire private citizens as coyote-control agents and train them in the use of snares, now legal. About 60 of these agents have been snaring roughly 400 coyotes per season (winter and early spring). Last season, 51 killed 564, presumably as a result of liberalized regulations implemented after the legislature passed a resolution asking the department "to encourage the harvest of coyotes."

The public is unhappy about this. In Augusta, at the June 1, 2002, meeting of a group of angry citizens who call themselves the Nosnare Task Force, Susan Cockrell showed me a coyote snare. Basically, it's a noose made of stout cable. You hang it from a tree, and when the coyote sticks its head through the loop, it closes on the animal's neck. A floppy washer keeps the loop from loosening. Cockrell, one of the group's founders, teaches nature writing at the University of Maine at Orono. Other founders include her husband, Will La Page, a forestry professor at the same institution; wildlife biologist Debra Davidson; and registered Maine guide Daryle DeJoy.

They plied me with internal correspondence they had excavated from the bowels of the department under threat of Maine's Sunshine Law, a state version of the Freedom of Information Act. As I perused the reports, memos, and e-mails, the value of the law became increasingly apparent. Without it, the public would never know what wildlife biologists think about coyote control or how the state legislature had secretly and successfully pressured the department into liberalizing the regs. Lawmakers had opted for a resolution rather than a bill because resolutions don't require public participation.

Department biologists repeatedly observe that killing coyotes stimulates reproduction and that in order to lower a population you have to remove at least 70 percent of the animals every year. But even with the relaxed regs, the control agents are getting only 4 percent. In areas off-limits to coyote controllers (Yellowstone National Park and the Hanford nuclear site in Washington State, for example), an average of fewer than two pups make it to fall. In "normal areas," where humans are busy killing the coyotes' main competition—i.e., other coyotes—the figure is about six.

Moreover, coyotes are highly territorial. An alpha male might be defending a cedar swamp, killing deer when conditions are right—say, four a winter. If that coyote is snared, half a dozen subordinate coyotes might move in and kill 24 deer. In 1946 federal agents killed 294,000 coyotes in 17 western states. In 1974—after 28 years of intensive trapping, shooting, and poisoning—they killed 295,000 in the same 17 states. When populations increase, so do ranges. Some scientists believe that coyote persecution in the West is why there are coyotes in the East.

"Coyote snaring is a mean-spirited government program whose sole intent is to catch and strangle wildlife with a wire noose, for some perceived biological gain," Chuck Hulsey, one of Maine's seven regional wildlife biologists, told me, emphasizing that he was speaking for himself and not his department. "You cannot stockpile deer like money in a mutual fund, to be enjoyed at a later date. Spending many tens of thousands of dollars to snare a few hundred coyotes . . . is a poor use of public dollars."

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Among wildlifers it is considered "unprofessional" to fret about humane issues. But there's a limit; when cruelty to wild animals becomes sufficiently severe and senseless, good biologists get involved. "Killing an animal by strangling it with a wire loop often results in a slow, painful death, sometimes lasting days . . ." wrote Hulsey to his bureau director. "It would violate state humane laws to treat a domestic dog in the same manner."

Hulsey is just one of many department biologists speaking out. Last fall Wally Jakubas, the agency's top mammal scientist, got concerned when, checking 94 snared coyotes during a study to determine the genetics of the beast, he noticed a large proportion of carcasses with grotesquely swollen heads, bullet holes, fractured limbs, and broken teeth. Of particular interest to Jakubas were the animals with swollen heads—"jellyheads," the snarers call them. When the snare doesn't close sufficiently, it constricts the jugular vein on the outside of the neck, cutting off blood returning to the heart; meanwhile, the carotid artery keeps pumping blood into the brain, eventually rupturing its vascular system. In a memo to his supervisor, Jakubas wrote: "I think it is also safe to say that [this] is an unpleasant death. Anyone who has had a migraine knows what it feels like to have swollen blood vessels in the head. To have blood vessels burst because of pressure must be excruciating." Almost a third of the animals Jakubas looked at were jellyheads. Almost another third had been clubbed or shot, indicating that, contrary to department claims, the snares hadn't killed them quickly. Coyote-control agents have to check their snares only every three days, and under the liberalized regs suggested by the legislature, they can get permission to check them only every seven days.

Jakubas promptly turned his report over to his superiors, who promptly sat on it. Eventually someone leaked it to Maine Public Radio, thereby setting the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine and the Maine Trappers Association into full cry. These outfits, which together make up the state's *entire* coyote-control lobby and which claim (falsely) to speak for Maine's hunters, anglers, and trappers, crammed their publications and web sites with screeds about the alleged treachery of Jakubas, the alleged incompetence of his help, and the alleged deficiencies of his study. He had revealed facts they didn't want to know and, especially, didn't want the public to know. Until this information got daylighted, the only thing they'd had to do to perpetuate the boondoggle was hiss into the ears of the 13 lawmakers who sit on the Joint Standing Committee on Fisheries and Wildlife.

Howard Chick of Lebanon, Maine, a member of the Sportsman's Alliance, has hunted deer since the 1930s. He was born in 1922, in the farmhouse where he lives. In 1881 his father was born in this farmhouse. In 1843 his grandfather was born in this farmhouse. The farmhouse is on Chick Road. Howard Chick "dispatches coyotes when they show themselves." But somehow there are never any fewer. He doesn't buy the balance-of-nature stuff. "These are things I don't have to have a biologist tell me," he proclaims, in reference to the department's assertion that you have to annually remove 70 percent of a coyote population to reduce it. "Suppose you had a dozen rattlesnakes in your immediate vicinity," he says. "Any one you dispatch is going to lessen the chances of your getting bit; it's the same with coyotes." But it isn't. Like so many other Maine deer hunters, Howard Chick doesn't understand that killing coyotes is like trying to put out a fire with kerosene. You can do it if the fire is small and you have lots of kerosene, but coyote populations are never small and, in comparison, the amount of control is always tiny.

In southern and central Maine there are now so many deer that in some areas they're damaging their range, but Howard Chick worries more about deer in the north, where they are less plentiful. This is the natural range of moose and caribou, and deer are here mostly because humans have created openings in the boreal forest. Even with thick conifers to provide thermal cover, deer get winter-stressed in these parts. And now a lot of that cover has been removed by spruce budworms and paper companies. The official line from Fisheries and Wildlife is that coyote control in the north woods, in specific deeryards, "may" result in temporary relief for wintering deer. But it also may not. The department doesn't know, because it hasn't done any research. "In

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northern, western, and eastern sections of Maine, inadequate wintering habitat is the primary factor limiting deer populations," writes Maine's deer biologist, Gerald Lavigne. "There, high predation rates by coyotes are the symptoms, not the cause, of deer population problems."

Lavigne had been responding to the state legislature, which in 1995 ordered the department to "conduct a study to determine the impact that coyotes have on deer, and to propose recommendations to encourage the harvest of coyotes." The bill had been sponsored by Howard Chick, who, in addition to being a farmer and a deer hunter, is a state representative, a member of the Joint Standing Committee on Fisheries and Wildlife, and the oldest member of the Maine legislature. Howard Chick, in fact, is the reason Maine now has paid recreational coyote snaring. Not believing the stuff he read in Lavigne's report, he introduced the 2001 resolution that hatched the liberalized snaring regulations. Before the resolution, coyote snaring (however misguided) had been in response to observed deer mortality. Now it's in response to the whims of the snarer.

It is curious behavior for the public to pay for the training of professional wildlife managers at state universities, pay their salaries, pay their expenses, and then pay politicians to tell them how to manage wildlife. According to Maine law, the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife "shall maintain a coyote-control program." It has no choice, but that excuse carries it only so far. The law also provides leeway: "The commissioner may employ qualified persons to serve as agents of the department for the purposes of coyote control." There's nothing in there that says he has to. Glenn Manuel, who thought penguins belong in Maine, was a career potato farmer. Lee Perry—the current commissioner, appointed in the fall of 1997—is a career wildlife biologist. Wildlife advocates expect more from him, especially now that the Nosnare Task Force has shown them the nasty realities of coyote control. As a first step Perry could order his information-and-education staff to drop everything and start disabusing Maine deer hunters of their copious superstitions. But instead of leading and educating, the department plays subordinate coyote to the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine and the Maine Trappers Association, rolling over and peeing on itself whenever it gets barked at.

In response to Chick's resolution, the department organized an ad hoc "study group" to make recommendations for new snaring regs. But of the groups that participated—the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, the Maine Trappers Association, coyote-control agents, the department, and the Maine Audubon Society—only the last disapproved of snaring. "The so-called 'study' consisted of one meeting and one phone call," complains Maine Audubon biologist Jody Jones. "The department took none of our advice. One thing that really upset me was that in the commissioner's form letter responding to letters and e-mails critical of the snaring program, he said Maine Audubon had participated in this group and these were the recommendations that came forward. That wasn't a lie, but the implication was that we supported the snaring program. We got angry calls from members."

The department also ignored a lot of advice from its own biologists, who had expressed concern for the nontarget wildlife that have been found dead in coyote snares—eagles, deer, moose, bears, fishers, foxes, bobcats, and especially Canada lynx, now federally threatened. They had asked that snaring not be conducted in March, when so much of this wildlife is on the move. They had objected to the proposed regulation that did away with the limit on the number of snares an agent can set. (Since snares cost less than a dollar each, there's scant motivation to collect them when the season is over.) They had asked that snaring not be done where lynx had been seen and in lynx-study areas. In every one of these cases they were overruled.

On the other hand, the department acquiesced to George Smith, director of the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, who had written Perry as follows: "The [snaring] limits are apparently proposed to appease federal officials and radical environmental groups now that the Canadian [sic] lynx has been listed. . . . We cannot support a policy that puts lynx ahead of deer in the north woods. . . . Our suspicions that DIF&W is not really committed

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to this program are only enhanced by this most recent decision [now revoked] to stop protecting deer in one of the largest and most important deeryards in the entire north woods."

The department's report to the legislature in response to the resolution listed 25 concerns of the ad hoc study group, followed by detailed explanations from the department. Concern No. 11 was "lack of support for snaring throughout MDIFW." But in the draft report the department declined to provide a single reason for this lack. When Hulsey suggested to his bureau director that the public deserved an explanation, he was told to write one. He complied, with a five-page memo that spared no detail. But the final report contained not a word of that explanation or of any other.

Whenever the public expresses concern about the threat to lynx, the department responds that no snarer has reported killing a lynx since the species was listed. *Of course* no snarer has reported killing a lynx. Such a confession could elicit prosecution under the Endangered Species Act. "We've had open discussions about the dangers of coyote snaring in lynx areas," says Paul Nickerson, chief of threatened and endangered species for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's northeast region. "So if a lynx is taken, no one can just say, 'Oops.' "

The official word from the department—repeatedly contradicted by internal correspondence from its own biologists—is that the coyote-snaring program is legitimate animal-damage control, *not* paid recreation. But animal-damage control is, as the name implies, a response to animal damage. You don't do it in advance. The department doesn't go around knocking off bears because they might one day tip over a beehive; it doesn't eradicate beavers in spring because they might flood someone's cellar the following winter.

However, the days when Maine wildlife could be managed by politicians like Howard Chick and radical special-interest groups like the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine and the Maine Trappers Association appear to be drawing to a close. For one thing, the Nosnare Task Force has alerted the public to the cruelty and stupidity of coyote control. Of recent comments received by the department from Maine residents, 7 supported coyote snaring, 4 were undecided, and 77 were opposed. Because the department is funded almost exclusively by hunters, fishermen, and trappers, it hasn't had to pay a lot of attention to anyone else. But that's changing, too. Next year 18 percent of its budget will come from the general fund, and with public funding comes public representation.

It is not clear how much of a threat eastern-coyote "control" is to nontarget species. It is abundantly clear that it is no threat whatsoever to the eastern coyote. Maybe what it threatens most is the reputation of legitimate, ethical sportsmen who already are getting kicked around by the animal-rights crowd. As Mark McCullough, the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife's endangered-species leader, has advised his supervisor: "All it will take will be one animal-rights advocate to videotape a 'jellyhead' in a snare and your program will be over, and maybe even take recreational trapping with it."

Moving into Maine with the coyotes themselves is the image of the western coyote controller, eloquently captured by Tom Rush. You wouldn't have heard "A Cowboy's Paean to a Coyote" (a paean, pronounced "pee-in," is a song of joyful praise or exultation). Rush wrote it when he lived in Wyoming, to commemorate a three-day coyote shoot in which several hundred participants came up with a total of two coyotes, one with tire tracks on it. Herewith, a few verses:

Go on out and shoot yourself some coyotes, / Makes a man feel good, Lord, it makes a man feel proud! / Go on out and shoot yourself some coyotes, / One for Mother, one for Country, one for God. / Well, if you're having trouble with the truck, or with the woman, / Maybe them kids are screwin' up in school. / If the cows are actin' smarter than the cowboy, / You gotta show the world you ain't nobody's fool. / I got my field rations

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straight from old Jack Daniel's, / Hank, Jr.'s on the eight-track in my four-by-four. / And I'd shoot a thousand coyotes if I could only just find one, / 'Cause, boys, that's what God made coyotes for.

Maine coyote control wastes something much more valuable than time, money, or even the sportsman's image. It wastes the credibility, effectiveness, and morale of an otherwise enlightened agency that is doing superb work restoring native ecosystems.

This year the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife has an \$8 million deficit, and Governor Angus King, who appears oblivious to the bad image coyote control is giving his state, has asked it to come up with ways of cutting back on expenditures. Under the liberalized snaring regulations, the costs of administering the coyote-control program have about tripled, at least according to one internal estimate. The governor needs to pay more attention to the people who truly know, the people who make the recommendations that get ignored by the decision makers, the people the public doesn't hear from except when someone rifles through dusty file cabinets—Maine's wildlife biologists. For the first budget cut, every one of them would have the same recommendation.

Ted Williams worked on one of Maine's last log drives.

What You Can Do

Help the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife shed the albatross of coyote control by expressing your views to Governor Angus King, Office of the Governor, 1 State House Station, Augusta, Maine 04333-0001, or via e-mail at governor@state.me.us. If you spend money in Maine, tell him so.