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Where the coyotes roam

BY VICTORIA DAVIS NOVEMBER 1, 2018

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UW-Madison students (left to right) Caleigh McCauley and Alex Daniels upload photos from a camera trap to laptop, while professor Omar Ohrens looks on.

Gentle hints of rain tap on yellow-leafed trees as a cardinal's chorus echos through the forest like surround sound at the Lakeshore Nature Preserve.

"This sound ... I could fall asleep to it," says freshman Destiny Medina, wet gravel crunching under her feet as she follows classmate Zach Ausavich through the preserve's southwestern trails. "It's just so peaceful."

Medina, Ausavich and the rest of the "Wolves, Dogs and People" ecology class, taught by visiting professor Omar Ohrens, have been setting up camera traps throughout the 300-acre preserve while conducting surveys with Lakeshore's visitors every Tuesday. Their goal is to not only gain understanding of the wildlife activity on the preserve, but also research how dogs off-leash affect the behaviors, habits and environment of wild canines; in this case, the coyotes that live on Lakeshore.

during his first year as a graduate student and who studied pumas in Chile using similar methods. “It’s practical application and it encourages students to go beyond just receiving information.”

Bringing up the rear of his ecology student pack, Ohrens explains that his job is to merely facilitate and be on-site, should the students need guidance. The survey questions, camera trap locations and data collecting are all managed by the class. After arriving at the preserve’s entrance, the students look over the survey questions and Lakeshore’s map, then split off into research groups of four.

“He really lets us take charge of all the specifics and just believes that everything is going to work out,” says Ausavich, holding his pencil and survey pad in one hand while pushing back tree branches with the other. “I know it looks really messy and it seems like no one can decide who’s going where...”

“But guess what, we figured it out,” Medina chimes in. “And we’re learning.”

The class is collecting valuable data from now into November, recording why many Lakeshore visitors choose to leave their dogs off-leash and how it’s affecting wildlife.

“Everyone we surveyed thinks this place is just a park,” says student Briana Bateman. “No one knows that it’s a research facility and most people we’re talking to don’t even know coyotes live here.”

The preserve functions as an outdoor laboratory for the university, hosting between 75 and 80 active research permits at any given time. Some research studies include setting up bait piles on the preserve, the smell attracting both dogs and coyotes.

“Dogs are pretty notorious for getting into things they shouldn’t,” says Adam Gundlach, field and projects coordinator for Lakeshore.

“We want people to keep their dogs on a leash so they don’t wander off and interfere with research,” adds Bryn Scriver, Lakeshore’s volunteer and outreach coordinator. “But our concern is more for the safety of the dog.”

Not only is snacking on dead deer carcasses a major health risk for adventurous and leashless dogs, it also puts them in conflict with wild canines. While coyotes are generally skittish around people, they’re less tolerant of dogs who eat their food.

Eagle Heights Woods. He attests to the territorial nature of coyotes.

“Six years ago, when we moved here, the people down the street just left their dog out for a couple hours out back and it got eaten by a coyote,” Max says. “Around that time there were two packs that were competing for space here and one ended up being relocated because they were getting too aggressive.”

Despite the “Dogs Must Be On Leash” signs posted at each trail’s entrance, most visitors today keep leashes in their pockets, meandering well behind their pup. Scriver says that she’s even had dog owners complain about coyotes staring at their dogs.

“The preserve directors said that if things keep progressing this way, it won’t be a matter of whether or not your dog can be off the leash,” says Bateman. “It will be about whether or not people can even bring their dogs to the preserve. My hope is that our class can keep that from happening by educating the public about the preserve and what it actually is.”

Class camera traps in the preserve: 10

Animals caught on camera: Turkeys, racoons, rabbits, cardinals, robins, squirrels, possums

Coyotes captured on camera since 2015: 4 (always at night)

Animal turfs: Foxes stay on east side of preserve; coyotes on the west

People captured on camera: “We’ll find pictures of people who, once they find out the thing attached to the tree is a camera, will start to make weird faces at it,” says Ohrens. “I also have hundreds of pictures of these two people sword fighting and they just never knew about the camera.”

Survey participant response to coyotes: “I’m not really afraid of them, I just want to go up and pet one.”

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