

THE BOOK OF THE WEEK



Jules Pretty explores our changing relationship with the wild through a look at a canine trickster

Coyote at the Kitchen Door
By Stephen DeStefano
Harvard University Press
224pp, £18.95
ISBN 9780674035560
Published 29 January 2010

The coyote is an American success. In a country with 300 million people, 80 cars for every 100 people and suburban sprawl that annually covers a further 890 square kilometres with concrete, this canine has become an icon. Its numbers have been increasing and its range has spread. Coyotes are accused of being vermin, pests and a danger to humans, yet they have survived decades of strychnine and cyanide poisoning, steel traps and snares and every kind of bullet. The coyote is a great survivor, and it occupies a place in our imagination too.

In *Coyote at the Kitchen Door*, Stephen DeStefano explores this relationship between humans and the wild through a series of stories and vignettes. There are snapshots of Alaskan islands, the Peruvian Andes and Botswanan wetlands alongside the mountains, plains, forests, fields and above all suburbs of North America. He journeys as a wildlife biologist

through these landscapes, and then reflects on leaving them – the “turning away from nature for something else, something of our own making”. Each chapter offers a narrative on a species in a wild place, then an urban or suburban story, and finally reflections on encounters with coyotes. The coyote will persist, he says, because it is constantly reinventing itself. And this is the central theme of this book – the liminal zone between people and the wild, where dichotomous distinctions become less clear the more we look.

The term wild is commonly used today to refer to ecosystems and situations where people have not interfered, yet we now know that people interfere with and manage most if not all ecosystems and their plants and animals. It is widely held across many cultures that non-agricultural animals are sentient, and so should be treated with respect. In northern regions, people feel that they influence

animals by both their thoughts and their actions and, for many, the idea that an animal could be wild is alien. The division between people and animals seems to occur with domestication (with the exception of dogs), and many

“Coyotes have survived decades of strychnine and cyanide poisoning, steel traps and snares and every kind of bullet”

communities see domesticated animals as something closer to plants than animals.

It is a strange thing. The domestic dog has been at our side for at least 14,000 years, possibly three times longer, and yet many humans have an almost visceral fear of its closest relatives, the wolf and coyote. This alarm exists much more in our imagination than in the real world. Each year,

15-20 Americans are killed by domestic dogs; in the UK, 10,000 people are attacked by dogs annually, and some 100,000 livestock are harmed. Yet it is the coyote and wolf we fear. Perhaps our dread of these other canines came after we began breeding dogs to be dangerous to other humans?

DeStefano observes that the coyote voice, as it echoes in the gloaming, “reminds us that we share the earth with others”. And it is, of course, our management decisions and policies that affect the lives of these animals. I am taken with the themes of connection and disconnection that run through this book. We moderns are much more disconnected from the wild, and so make decisions that are often perverse. In US states, wildlife management is guided by voter referendums – and when you get more urban people in a district, their votes prevail. At the same time, animals are changing identity. The cougar, for example, has changed in half a century from pest to rare species to wilderness icon and lately to threat to human safety. The coyote, with its capacity to slip from wild to domestic, from forest to backyard, exemplifies this constant refashioning of our relationships with the wild.

Two weeks ago, a friend of mine shot an old coyote. He was old, ragged, flecked with grey, and he simply stood in the open land by my friend’s camp out in the swamp, awaiting his end. Coyotes came to the bayous of southern Louisiana just 15 years ago, and they are keen predators of the rabbits that are valued food for swamper. Crawfish, frogs, catfish and deer form the basis of wild foods from the swamps. And now the coyote has come. The boundaries are shifting.

Last year, I sat with the oldest surviving elder of the Timbisha Shoshone, Pauline Esteves, in their homeland, the place we renamed Death Valley. A sandstorm swirled and roared up the valley, closing up this vast landscape. For a century and a half, the Timbisha were excluded from their own land. Now they have been granted a small reservation. Yet this is the coyote’s land for, according to the Timbisha, he not only made the world, but dictates many of its rules. “Ever since I was young,” said Esteves, “we were told coyote

stories. They taught us how to behave.” For the coyote is also the trickster. He behaves badly, mocking birds for their flight, makes wings from feathers and wax, but flies too close to the sun and the wax melts. Pride, here too, comes before a fall. When the coyote wants to eat the wrong food, he ends up eating his own brains. Timbisha elders call that place out near the lowest place on

“The coyote, with its capacity to slip from wild to domestic, from forest to backyard, exemplifies the constant refashioning of our relationships with the wild”

the continent The Brains. Indeed, at every place in their land, said Esteves, you had coyote stories. “I wonder if this is where coyote passed through,” she would muse when walking.

The following morning, the wind had dropped away, and the sun slipped over the Amargosa mountains and lit the land with a rose light, and a coyote walked slowly past our camp, swaying its head from side to side. It stopped, looked back over its shoulder and, with a kinetic blur of legs, was away across the salty flats – and towards the unnatural green of the irrigated grass of the distant golf course. The coyote, forever between the wild and tamed.

DeStefano concludes this book with reflections on Aldo Leopold’s great essay *The Land Ethic*, and proposes a suburban version.

Everything we depend upon for our survival – water, food, air, basic necessities and material possessions – comes in some way from the land. This is true whether we live in a cabin in the wilderness, a farming village, a high-rise apartment, or a house in the suburbs. The important thing is how much we consume of these vital resources and, ultimately, how we could consume less, which is essential if the planet is to survive. DeStefano describes coming upon a road-injured coyote on a summer’s day. The coyote is so harmed he has to dispatch it with a shovel. He stands and watches the traffic. “The world is not quiet,” he reflects, “I am just not hearing it. I avoided people for the remainder of the day.” The wild, in one way or another, still has ways of touching us in meaningful ways.

There is more than a hint of American exceptionalism in *Coyote at the Kitchen Door* that will jar for readers from Europe or elsewhere. And I’m not entirely sure we need to know that the author is prone to anger or severe mood swings. Nonetheless, this book is about a topic that matters – our engagements with the land and its animals. The coyote is not just the trickster. It is part of the stories that suggest how we should behave for the sake of our own futures.

Jules Pretty is professor of environment and society, University of Essex. He is author of *The Earth Only Endures: On Reconnecting with Nature and Our Place In It* (2007) and co-editor of the forthcoming *Nature and Culture* (2010).