Dangerous Animals

This is the time of year when Karen Savant hears them howling in the woods and knows that they're breeding.

“We have a pack of 15 to 20 of them, and this is their territory,” she says. “They have no fear.”

The woods around the Savant farm outside Sunset are a refuge for the so-called “coy-dog,” an animal that is half coyote, half dog, with the most dangerous characteristics of each. One has tried to attack two of her children and was fought off by one of the family’s dogs. On another occasion, three seemed ready to attack her before her own dogs intervened.

She doesn’t allow her children outside after dark, and no one goes outside after dark alone, at least not without a shotgun. Karen and her husband Robert have also boarded up stalls in their barn to protect goats and horses about to give birth, and “hot-wired” the pigpen to protect piglets.

Last year, two female coy-dogs boldly traveled across the property daily, each accompanied by a litter of puppies. Savant says they don’t seem to fear gunshots, and professional trapping efforts have failed.

Coys-dogs are the fearful and unnatural result of the meeting of the wild and the domesticated, and of man’s failure to control the canine population. Most often the result of the mating of a female coyote and a stray or feral male dog, a coy-dog combines the cunning of a wild animal with a familiarity with man and his habits.

A wild animal avoids man. The coy-dogs don’t.

In Lafayette Parish, the number of complaints about coy-dogs held steady last year after going up during 1989 and 1990, says Roicy Duhon, director of the parish animal shelter and its animal control program. The problem is not so great in Lafayette Parish as it is in St. Landry and Vermilion parishes, he says, because there is less rural area.

Still, there were nearly two dozen reports last year, mostly involving the killing of livestock—usually lambs, baby goats or calves. Coy-dog reports have come from the Scott, Carencro and Broussard areas.

“A lot of it is being blamed on German Shepherd dogs. But it’s not a German Shepherd dog. It’s a coy-dog,” says Duhon. Because the coy-dog is often a bigger version of the coyote, it can be mistaken for a German Shepherd.

Unlike coyotes, coy-dogs tend to run in packs, which makes them more dangerous, Duhon says. “They certainly aren’t afraid of man. They know man too well,” he says.

They’re also familiar with traps. Animal control officials have set several, but only caught two coy-dogs over the last few years. Both of those were young and obviously inexperienced, Duhon says. Because coy-dogs are not wild animals but not tame either, the two were unadoptable and were euthanized.

Traps haven’t worked for the Savant family either. A trapper hired by state predator control officials has tried. Karen Savant says the coy-dogs have been able to dig up and uncover the traps and get to the bait without sprunging them. On the one occasion when one was caught, fellow pack members apparently freed it before her husband got to it.

One of the neighbors had a herd of sheep killed, Karen says. But the Savants’ experiences have been far more terrifying than just the loss of livestock.

The family was living just up the road from the farm when a coy-dog attempted to attack two of the children, Tracy, then 12, and Jeremy, then 10. Karen recalls that it was daytime, and the children were out of school for some reason.

She decided to make blackberry cobber and sent them to the back of the property to pick blackberries. She heard them scream and discovered one of the family dogs fighting off a coy-dog that had tried to attack her children. Her older son, 19, shot and killed the coy-dog. The children were untouched and unhurt.

Then last year, on the farm property, Karen was working in the garden and her dogs were playing nearby. She heard some growling and looked up to see three coy-dogs step out from the fence line.

“They weren’t looking at my dogs. They were looking at me,” Savant recalls. “These looked like coyotes, but they were the size of German Shepherds.” Again, her dogs fought them off. She was unable to shoot at the coy-dogs for fear of hitting one of her own.

Unless domestic dogs are kept under control, the coy-dog problem in Acadiana most likely will remain. Savant says a large part of the problem in her area is that people frequently dump unwanted dogs and abandon them, leading to roaming and indiscriminate breeding with coyotes. The abandoned dogs are also likely to get killed by coy-dogs. “They seem to enjoy killing dogs,” says Savant.

Dogs must be spayed or neutered and kept under control by the owner to reduce the chances of random breeding, says Duhon. It’s also possible that coy-dogs will start to die off in the second and third generation, he says. This is because they become gradually less wild through inbreeding, both among themselves and among domesticated dogs, and, more importantly, they are less healthy.

A first-generation hybrid has the natural immunities of the wild coyote and also gets some benefit from any vaccinations the domesticated dog may have received. Succeeding generations don’t have those advantages and are more likely to be susceptible to canine diseases.

Karen Savant would like to think that’s true. She says that over the last couple of weeks, she’s had less trouble with the coy-dogs than usual. But there are a couple of fawns on the way. And she still hears the coy-dogs, howling in the night.