

## *Return of the Native*



One still autumn night some years ago, I was out in the woods under a smoky half moon when I heard a wolf howl. I had just climbed a ridge and was resting on a stone wall with a darkened, grassy meadow ahead of me and the deep, mysterious hollows of the woods behind. The howl sounded out from the area that I had just come through. It was a long, brassy yowl that began with a series of short barks and rose in a classical wolfly crescendo, and it was repeated several times, growing fainter with each howl.

I would wager that nobody raised in a European cultural tradition hears such a sound without hearing as well the full scope of wolf mythology. I shuddered. Then I returned to reason. Wolves don't attack people, and in any case this was eastern Massachusetts, and the last wolves were extirpated from this valley by 1723, according to the local histories. What I had heard, of course, was an eastern coyote. I later learned that a lone male coyote will sometimes howl like a wolf when it is not traveling with a pack. I was not at all surprised to hear this. In fact, I had been waiting for them.

Because of a variety of historical accidents, the land around the house in which I live has yet to be developed. There is a series of old fields that drop down to the wide floodplain of a slow-moving brook, and there are three working farms to the north and west and nearly a square mile of woodland. There are foxes, muskrats, otters, raccoons, opossums, and far too many skunks. It was only a question of time before a coyote showed up.

Eastern coyotes, whoever they are, wherever they came from, have been increasing in number in New England for over forty years. Records indicate that they were in the Adirondack region in the 1940s and by the late 1950s had made it to Massachusetts. One was seen in Otis in the midfifties and a year later one turned up at Quabbin.

Whether these are a new breed of coyote recently arrived, or a return of the native, is a matter of debate among mammalogists. But all agree that a large canid of some sort was living here when the first English settlers arrived and that, in

keeping with European tradition, the thing, whatever it was, had to be destroyed.

At first the colonists tried bounties using the local Indians as hunters and paying as much as ten shillings or a bushel of corn for the head of a wolf. Fittingly perhaps, given the Judeo-Christian culture of the colonists, the façade of an early church north of Boston was adorned with wolf heads. But once having cleared the wolves from settled regions, the Indians ranged the forest and brought in wolf heads from elsewhere. They also tried selling the same wolf head twice,



until the colonists started cutting ears. The Europeans tried dog packs to hunt the wolves, then baits and poisons, and guns on trip wires, and then, finally, they got the right idea and began cutting swamps and “waest grownds” that sheltered the wolf packs, a tradition that

is still continuing to this day for different reasons!

The current thinking is that the coyote we see and hear in the backyards of suburban New England does indeed have some wolf genes, picked up as the existing western coyote population moved eastward through the wilderness of the Great Lakes region and Canada. Now coyotes are found everywhere. Individuals have made it across the Cape Cod Canal and have been sighted on the lower Cape; they appear within Route 128; one was seen on Marblehead Neck, and of course packs of coyotes are common in the Berkshires and everywhere else throughout rural New England.

This relative of the large canid that killed the livestock of the earliest settlers still has a taste for sheep and chickens and will not refuse a well-fed house cat if

it fails to make it to the nearest tree. But this supposedly vicious predator, with its gleaming, yellow eyes, more commonly makes do with mice, frogs, birds, berries, and even corn.

The beauty of all this is that nature abides. The wolf of history, or something very like it, has returned because the primeval New England forest, or something very like it, has returned. The English invaders who settled here in the seventeenth century attempted to remake the New World into a mirror image of the Old World. In fact, they very nearly succeeded. But lurking in the little corners and undisturbed pockets of woodland, primal America endured, and now the ancient order has reasserted itself. Black bears wander into suburban yards in Clinton, herds of white-tailed deer graze at the woodland edges, the beaver floods backyards and streets, and, sometimes at night, in the middle of a civilized sleep, the wolf howls outside the bedroom window.

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