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NOVEMBER 2018

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A coyote in the hills of Pacifica photographed by Janet Kessler.

ON THE COVER: Pacifica Mayor John Keener. Photo by Kyle Ludowitz.

Editor's Note

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Coyotes, conquistadors and Keener

Did you know that coyotes sometimes creep around on their toes to avoid detection or that they give birth in holes? How about that they can run faster than the speed limit on most urban roads? Are you aware that they use a wide variety of vocalizations — howls, barks, growls and even an occasional squeal — to make their point? Neither did I, but the internet is overflowing with interesting facts about the dog-like creatures that some say are increasingly sharing our suburbs.

This month, we meet Janet Kessler, who turned a surprise encounter with a coyote into a hobby of sorts. As you will read, she learned that these are complicated creatures with some distinctly humanlike characteristics. We can't thank her enough for sharing her stunning photography with us.

And say hello to Mayor John Keener. I often wonder why busy local folks like him would step forward to run for office. It's usually fairly organic. Some small issue in the neighborhood becomes a calling and he or she learns how local government works and that people just like them are making a difference in their communities.

In Keener's case, the issue was the proposed widening of Highway 1. Next thing you know, he was knocking on 7,000 doors and talking to voters. Now the former scientist is charged with making decisions that stretch well beyond his initial interest.

Perhaps Gaspar de Portolá would relate. The Spanish explorer set out to find Monterey and ended up introducing Europeans to that and so much more. You can read about that fateful trip in this month's history column, thanks to Pacifica Historical Society treasurer Jerry Crow.

So, turn the page and explore. Let us know what you think of what you find.

— Clay Lambert

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letters and photos.
Send to our editor
Clay Lambert.
clay@pacificamagazine.com*

EDITOR

Clay Lambert
clay@pacificamagazine.com

WRITERS

Vanitha Sankaran
Clay Lambert

COPY EDITOR

Julie Gerth

PHOTOGRAPHER

Kyle Ludowitz

DESIGN

Shari Chase

CONTRIBUTORS

Jerry Crow
Cynthia Nations

BUSINESS OFFICE

Barbara Anderson

ADVERTISING SALES

Karin Litcher
Randie Marlow
randie@pacificamagazine.com

CONTACT US

(650) 726-4424
www.pacificamagazine.com

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Neighbors **IN THE NIGHT** COYOTES COEXIST IN PACIFICA

*By Vanitha Sankaran
Photos by Kyle Ludowitz
and Janet Kessler*



Janet Kessler didn't set out to track and learn about urban-dwelling coyotes. Rather, they found her and rather serendipitously.

Healing from an injury that kept Kessler from playing her pedal harp, she found herself left with unexpected time. She took to long walks with her dog, and one early morning in 2007 she saw her first coyote. "That meeting was thrilling and eye-opening," she says. "The little coyote came bounding around the bend of a hill and stopped short to stare at us. My dog and I did the same."

The coyote fled, but then immediately returned. Kessler sat with her dog, and the coyote lay down not far away. They watched each other for about 20 minutes. "It was a very mutual experience, each party obviously enchanted by the other. The coyote periodically got up and ran off a little ways and then bounced back enthusiastically, with a little mid-air twist at the height of each excited little bounce, although she also did so cautiously."

It was then that Kessler realized how aware, sentient, intelligent and even communicative coyotes are. Intrigued to learn more, she saw her little friend again about a month later, and many times since, along with other coyotes. "I became known in the parks as 'The Coyote Lady,'" she says, "and I gained a good reputation as a pioneer in the photo-documentation of coyotes. I've been doing this now for over 11 years."

Coyotes claim territory — land and the resources on it — as a family, that is a male and a female coyote that pair for life. While Kessler is not certain of the regional total, she explains that any particular area will only have one family of coyotes that is tasked with keeping others out. "In cities, coyote population can be as dense as one family per less than a square mile in places, according to professor Stan Gehrt, of Ohio State University," she says. "In more rural areas, he has found their density to be about one family per every three to four square miles."





Coyote photos courtesy of Janet Kessler



"I BECAME KNOWN IN THE PARKS AS 'THE COYOTE LADY' ... I'VE BEEN DOING THIS NOW FOR OVER 11 YEARS."
JANET KESSLER, COYOTE WATCHER

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When asked about the personality of coyotes, Kessler lights up. “Your average coyote is intelligent, curious, playful, protective, adventurous, cunning, independent, self-reliant, has family values and a frontier spirit, and strong individuality. Those are the same rugged frontier characteristics we value in ourselves. Coyotes also exhibit affection, care, happiness, patience, timidity and dejection.” She notes that while people might see all coyotes as the same, just like with dogs, for example, every coyote is different. They have different facial looks, personalities, histories and social situations. “This is one of the reasons they are so fascinating to observe and document.”

As opportunistic eaters, coyotes in this area mostly eat rodents, although when their preferred foods are scarce, they will live off road kill such as raccoons or deer. Although they may eat garbage, a study of their scat has found that garbage composes only 2 to 5 percent of their diet, says Kessler. “They prefer natural foods.” She warns people not to let their cats roam free because coyotes are known to snare them. “Having said this,” she said, “I do know several coyotes who actually flee from cats!”

In the past 20 years, coyotes have been increasingly moving into urban areas, gravitating toward open spaces and forested areas, but also into neighborhoods with people. The animals have adapted around us, with their active hours between dusk and dawn when humans are less active. “They are diurnal,” Kessler explains, though they “can be seen at any time. Some have adapted by looking both ways before crossing streets, and some even use the traffic lights. Nonetheless, one of the chief killers of coyotes in urban areas, especially of youngsters, is cars.”

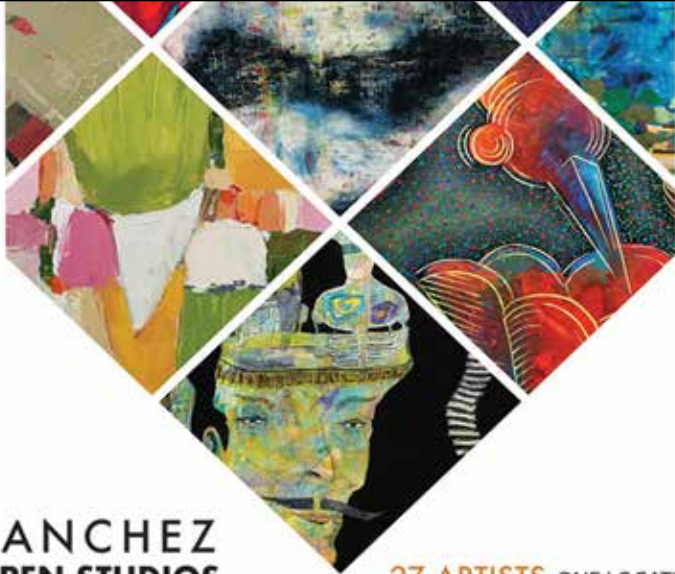
As social animals, coyotes have some of the same drives and activities humans pursue in their daily lives. They interact with each other constantly, grooming, teasing, chasing, wrestling, even playing tricks on each other. They have intense family issues like getting parental attention and sibling rivalry. Says Kessler, “There is constant communication through body language and eye contact. They display feelings of rejection and dejection. I’ve seen loners — those without families — perform for human audiences seemingly for the attention — maybe the attention that they normally would get from a family.”

Seeing these similarities opens the doors to understanding them, she believes. Kessler encourages people to spend time watching coyotes in the hopes that others will see them the way she does, as creatures “living parallel lives to our own, with similar concerns: They mate for life, live in families, have family squabbles, have to make a living (by hunting). They defend their homes from intruders.

“Youngsters grow up and leave, and everyone eventually gets old, arthritic and tired,” she said. “Hmm. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?”

She cautions that while there is no reason for people to fear coyotes, respect is key. They are wild animals and it’s important to treat them as such. She advocates for a golden guideline: “Always remain alert. And the minute you see a coyote, no matter how close or far away it is, especially if you have a dog, walk away from it. Distance is your best line of safety and also the coyote’s.” While some advocates advise scaring coyotes away with verbal commands or throwing small objects nearby, Kessler feels that’s not always effective, especially if dens and pups are nearby. “I’ve found it’s best just to move away from them.”

The biggest urban coyote issue, of course, is pets. Kessler sees three coyote behaviors that impact pets: their territoriality (particularly against dogs in their claimed area), their predator-prey behavior (all small animals are fair game to them), and their opportunistic behavior (don’t leave out food or other enticing delights). “Messaging is always their first line of action,” Kessler explains. “Messaging is communication. Coyotes are



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Janet Kessler, known locally as "The Coyote Lady," has been observing and photographing coyotes around Pacifica for more than a decade.

“(COYOTE)
YOUNGSTERS GROW
UP AND LEAVE,
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OLD, ARTHRITIC
AND TIRED. HMM.
SOUNDS FAMILIAR,
DOESN'T IT?”
JANET KESSLER, COYOTE WATCHER

masters at it. The problem is that few people or dogs are adept at reading it. They “message” through facial expressions and body language, and they may charge and nip at the haunches or back legs of a dog — cattle dog fashion — to get the dog to leave. It’s a clear communication. Rather than having to deal with such messaging, it’s best to keep your distance in the first place and, better yet, to always walk away.”

While people are right to treat coyotes cautiously, Kessler sees a swing of the pendulum in that more people are accepting and even embracing their neighborhood coyotes. That’s best done from a reasonable distance while humans and coyotes navigate boundaries for coexisting, but Kessler has a few ideas on how we can become better neighbors. This involves minor habitat modification, such as planting thickets, which coyotes use as safety zones, erecting fences to keep coyotes off trails and paths in high use, and creating fenced-in dog play areas, especially for small dogs. She even floats a more radical idea — setting up temporary feeding stations within each claimed territory to provide coyotes food and water during times of high stress, like extreme weather situations.

Above all, education is the best tool for understanding more about coyotes and how to act around them. For more information, visit Kessler’s blog at <https://coyoteyipps.com/>. PACIFICA