



Behaviour of a Coyote Caching and Stalking Prey in British Columbia

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On 27 July 2016, at 0857 hrs PDT, I started a waterbird survey at Okeefe's Pond, located about 10.5 km north northwest of Vernon city centre, when I noticed a young Coyote (*Canis latrans*) on the opposite or north side of the pond. My vehicle was parked along the side of Highway 97. The Coyote appeared unaware of me so for the next nine minutes I was able to watch and photograph it without disturbing it. The series of photographs have been deposited in the photo-records file for British Columbia (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).

Okeefe's Pond (11U 337281E 5581293N), is a

small triangular-shaped pond with a horse pasture on its west side, longer grasses and a driveway to a building to its north, St. Anne Road along its east and Highway 97 along its south. A narrow band of bulrushes (*Scirpus* sp.) occurs along the southeast and south shores.

Waterbirds that breed around the pond, or nearby, include Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*), puddle and diving ducks, Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*), and American Coot (*Fulica americana*). However, the Coyote did not seem interested in the watchful group of waterbirds that swam offshore.



Figure 1. Coyote carrying carcass of Muskrat found in a burrow along the shore of O'Keffe's Pond. *Photo by Chris Siddle, 27 July 2016. BC Photo 4143a.*

In what seemed like typical foraging behavior, the Coyote investigated the grasses a few metres northeast of the pond. Its position suggested that the animal has just crossed St. Anne Road from a large cornfield west of the O'keefe Ranch. It pushed through sedges (*Carex* sp.) to the narrow muddy north shore. It trotted along the shore a few metres then stopped to examine, from a distance, the mouth of a burrow leading into the shore. It sniffed the shore around the burrow and eventually picked up what appeared to be a small dead Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*; Figure 1). It carried the stiff little body a metre or two away from the pond, dropped it, urinated on it (Figure 2), picked it up again and took it to towards a utility pole behind the pond (Figure 3). After gazing upwards at the pole, it dug a small hole at its base and buried the body. Caching behaviour is well known for Coyotes (Hatler et al. 2008).



Figure 2. Coyotes frequently mark food and caches with urine but this behaviour does not necessarily protect it from other mammals (Harrington 1982). *Photo by Chris Siddle, O'Keefe's Pond, Vernon, BC, 27 July 2016. BC Photo 4143b.*

The Coyote returned to the shore at 0901 hrs and walked to a small dock on the west side where it eased itself into the pond and swam under the dock. It emerged to retrace its route, often running and once jumping. At 0903 hrs the Coyote reached the northeast corner of the pond, closest to St. Anne Road. It turned around and ran back along the shore two more times, finally stopping for a few seconds short of 0905 hrs. to chase its tail. This behaviour was followed by another rapid dash back to the northeast



Figure 3. Coyote carrying carcass of Muskrat (left) and selecting an area to cache it at the bottom of a utility pole. *Photo by Chris Siddle, O'Keefe's Pond, Vernon, BC, 27 July 2016. BC Photo 4143c.*

corner. I judged the running by the horizontal position of the animal's tail, its pace, and the expression on its face to be solitary play. The species' occasional playful nature and "high spirits" has been noted by others (Banfield 1974; Figure 4)



Figure 4. At times the young Coyote appeared to be playfully romping along the shore of the pond. *Photo by Chris Siddle, O'Keefe's Pond, Vernon, BC, 27 July 2016. BC Photo 4143d.*

At the northeast corner of the pond, the Coyote spotted a Western Painted Turtle (*Chrysemys picta bellii*) basking a few metres offshore atop a sunken fence. With ears pricked forward (Figure 5), the Coyote stepped slowly and cautiously into the water clearly in an attempt to stalk the reptile. Then it began to swim towards the turtle (Figure 6). When the Coyote was approximately two metres distant, the turtle quickly slipped off its perch and disappeared underwater. The Coyote swam to the spot, examined the water's surface, the top of the sunken fence, and

even plunged its muzzle beneath the surface in an effort to find the turtle. After circling the end of the sunken fence, the Coyote swam back to the shore and walked toward St. Anne Road where it shook itself like a wet dog. It lay in the sun on the grass for a few seconds until a man on a loud motorcycle passed by on St. Anne Road and, seeing the Coyote, slowed to a stop. The Coyote streaked across the road and disappeared into an adjacent cornfield.

Coyote is a generalist and opportunist, and in the Lower Mainland is known to feed on and



Figure 5. A Western Painted Turtle, basking on a partially submerged fence railing, caught the eye of the young prowling Coyote. *Photo by Chris Siddle, O'Keefe's Pond, Vernon, BC, 27 July 2016. BC Photo 4143e.*



Figure 6. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. The young Coyote has a slim chance of adding the turtle to its diet for the day! *Photo by Chris Siddle, O'Keefe's Pond, Vernon, BC, 27 July 2016. BC Photo 4143f.*

cache Muskrat (Hatler et al. 2008, Atkinson and Shackelton 1991). The role of reptiles in its diet in British Columbia is unknown but observations at O'Keefe's Pond suggest that turtles could be a small component.

While this episode lasted only 12 minutes and 9 seconds (according to the clock in my camera), the opportunistic nature of a Coyote's foraging was on display (Naughton 2012). The animal not only scavenged and cached a dead Muskrat for possible future consumption but it also attempted to prey, unsuccessfully, on a Western Painted Turtle. Also, while the Coyote ran along the shore for four laps, its body posture and the expression on its face suggested the animal was indulging in solitary play and expressing its "high spirits." †

Literature Cited

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About the Author

Sustaining himself through his adolescence on a steady diet of the works of Gerald Durrell, Ernest Thompson Seton, David Attenborough (he wrote books as he started his film-making career), and Raymond Ditmars, supplemented with Chess Lyons' Klahane TV series, Chris became a naturalist. While teaching school at Fort St. John, BC, under the mentorship of Wayne Campbell, he became a major contributor to *The Birds of British Columbia* project (1990-2001). Now retired and living in Vernon, Chris was honoured as the 2016 recipient of the B.C. Field Ornithologists' Steve Cannings Award for his major contributions to ornithology in BC.