

Reports of coyotes rampant in neighboring towns

By **MARIE EKBERG PADILLA**
Capistrano Valley News

After being awoken in the middle of the night by the sound of his dog yelping in the back yard, Cameron Pearce rushed outside to see what was going on. He was startled by a horrible sight.

His 3-year-old Chinese pug, Ming, had most of its skin ripped off, but was still alive. He wrapped his beloved pet in towels and rushed it to the Crown Valley Care Center in Laguna Niguel. Even though the veterinarians were able to stabilize Ming, the dog didn't have enough skin to survive and had to be put to sleep.

"The damage was so ferocious that we're thinking it was from a mountain lion," said Pearce, a Nellie Gail resident who said he saw a big animal, which looked like a mountain lion, jump over his 7-foot fence as he came out to the back yard and found Ming last month.

Since then, Pearce said he has been on a crusade to warn people about the wild animals. A lot of pets are missing from the area, he said. Department of Fish and Game officials, who deal with wildlife issues, said that calls come in from south

Orange County every day about missing pets and sightings of coyotes.

"There have been more sightings now during the summer because they (coyotes and mountain lions) are looking for water and food," said Kent Smirl, patrol lieutenant for Fish and Game.

Joseph Torres, a senior volunteer for the department, said that there have been a lot of coyote reports in Laguna Niguel and Aliso Viejo.

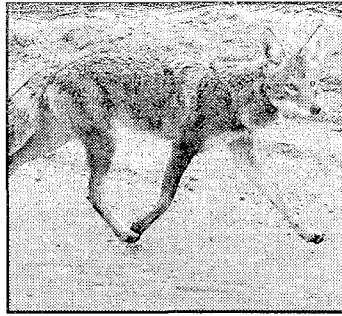
"During the summer, the coyotes have pups so they go out and look for food," the 16-year Laguna Niguel resident said. "Cats and dogs are definitely on the food chain for coyotes."

Torres pointed out that increasing developments are displacing the wild animals from their natural habitat and force them into neighborhoods.

"They start urbanizing and are not afraid of people anymore," he said.

There has been a rash of reports of sightings and attacks from the wild animals around South Orange County.

Cindy Butler, an Aliso Viejo resident had her white terrier attacked and killed by a coyote in June.



BRUCE CHAMBERS/The News

ON THE PROWL: Cameron Pearce of Laguna Niguel said the wild animal that skinned his 3-year-old Chinese pug looked like a mountain lion.

Another Aliso Viejo resident called the Sheriff's Department in July to report what she thought was a mountain lion walking down the street carrying a cat in its mouth. The street is next to Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park. Deputies searched the area, but the animal was not found. The animal might have been a bobcat, not uncommon in the area, deputies said.

Last year, two women said they were chased by a coyote in Laguna Niguel. Cindy Carey and Natalie Villanueva and their four boxer dogs were

walking behind Marian Bergeson Elementary School when the coyote came charging against them. After the women ran about 500 feet, with the coyote coming as close as 10 feet away, the women threw two beer cans they found on the side of the path. That seemed to deter the coyote that stopped and ran off.

Three pulse-racing sightings of a mountain lion were enough for officials at Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park in Trabuco Canyon to take the unusual step of closing the park for 24 hours in February – the first time in five years that a local park has been shut because of a mountain lion. Studies of tracks lead rangers to believe there might be three mountain lions roaming the 3,400-acre park – an adult and two adolescents.

Also in February, a livestock caretaker in Silverado Canyon shot and killed a 100-pound female mountain lion that attacked two of his goats.

However, mountain lion sightings are rare in Orange County, and behavior that includes getting close to humans is unusual, said Bruce Buchman, a district supervisor of county parks. Attacks on peo-

ple are also rare, with an estimated 100 deaths and injuries reported in the United States and Canada since 1890.

To raise awareness about wildlife and educate the public how to prevent attacks from mountain lions and coyotes, Fish and Game has launched a senior volunteer program called Impact. Torres is one of the volunteers who take sighting reports out of the Laguna Woods office. He also tries to find evidence of the sightings and provide information to worried residents.

Torres said that people have to learn how to live close to wildlife. Now, people indirectly provide food, water, and shelter to the animals by leaving their pets outside overnight, leaving runoff water from sprinklers, not picking up fallen fruit, and not keeping landscaping trimmed, he said.

To increase the awareness, Torres encouraged residents who see mountain lions or encounter coyotes to report it to the local Fish and Game office in Laguna Woods at (949) 581-5782. More information: www.keepmewild.org and www.dfg.ca.gov