The Coyote Gangs of Hope

Catherine Schmitt

On the first warm Saturday of spring, my friend Keri sat on the grass doing grad-school homework on her laptop in front of her rented house, down a dead-end road on seventy acres of old farmland in Hope, Maine. Pussy willows were starting to fuzz in the swamps. Scattered clumps of crocuses provided the only color in a landscape still emerging from the dull shadow of winter. Keri liked the privacy of the farm. There were plenty of trails and swimming holes nearby, and the house was a short drive to her water quality protection job at the county extension office.

Not wanting to waste any sun, the first real strong rays of the year, Keri wore a tank top, shorts, and flip-flops. Luna, her boyfriend's 110-pound Rottweiler-Akita-Lab mix with a red brindle coat, lounged next to her on the grass, soaking up the warmth. Keri's fine blond hair glinted in the sun, long strands falling in front of her glasses as she typed. She heard the high-pitched calls of hounds coming from the woods across the road. Not recognizing the howl, she wondered if someone had lost a dog.

Keri heard more barking and whining, then the sound of rolling tires crunching on the gravel. A club-cab pickup truck was coming up the driveway.

Not accustomed to unannounced guests, Keri told me she was unsure what to do. She put Luna inside the house and approached the truck, which had stopped in front of the barn.

She wondered if this person was looking for the dogs she'd heard barking. Keri approached the driver's side of the car.

"Hello…can I help you?" Keri asked.

The car door opened and a figure stepped out of the truck.

"Are you looking for your dog? I heard a dog earlier from the other side of the road…"

The figure took the shape of a tall, broad-shouldered woman, maybe in her late forties. Turning her back to Keri, the woman reached behind the driver's seat and pulled out a rifle, which she slung over her shoulder. Keri glanced into the truck bed. Hounds were caged in wire crates, their tongues hanging, eyes half-closed, saliva dripping from their mouths.

"Can I bring out some water for your dogs?" Keri heard Luna inside the house, scratching at the windows and barking.

"No." The woman turned around. Keri looked at the gun, and then at a large, dish-shaped GPS tracking unit in the woman's left hand. The woman wore steel-toed boots, green camouflage pants, and a pocketed vest. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. And she had a beard—dark, wispy sprouts of hair around her mouth and chin.

Keri realized that the woman had been hunting coyotes.

Keri sometimes heard coyotes at night. She liked the sound. She thought coyotes symbolized the wildness of Maine—a wildness she felt had been lost from her homeground in the Midwest. Keri also thought the coyote to be a symbol of hope. Coyotes had seemed to overcome so many challenges, adapt, succeed.

"You know," Keri said to the stranger, "I don't feel comfortable with you being here, hunting coyotes on this property. I'm afraid for my dog…I have a lot of respect for those animals; coyotes are resilient…" her voice trailed off as the woman dismissed her with a smirk and placed large hands on Keri's slender shoulders. The stranger leaned in, inches from her face. Keri looked up at her, feeling small.

"We're gonna access this property to hunt those animals no matter what you say," the stranger snarled. Keri looked up into the woman's white, freckly face. She couldn't speak. She was trying to contain her alarm at the woman's facial hair. Brown hairs hung down from the chin, and a long mustache

curled around the woman's dry lips.

A stick snapped, and Keri turned to see two short men coming out of the woods, jeans hanging off their hips, dingy strands of hair hanging out of blaze-orange baseball caps, guns slung loose over their shoulders. The woman said something to the men; one of them got in the passenger side of the truck and the other climbed into the bed with the barking dogs as the woman got in the driver's side. The truck kicked up gravel dust as the coyote hunters left.

Keri stood there in the driveway, stunned.

She would never feel safe at that house again.

The bearded woman and her male companions had been hunting[1] on land owned by a local lumber company, hundreds of forested acres surrounding Keri's rental property. The land is not posted against trespassing, so it is open to hunters, as is the norm in rural Maine. Keri's landlords had told her they allowed a few neighbors to hunt deer, turkey, and small game on their property, but not coyotes. After the encounter, Keri confirmed with her landlords that the three people who came into her yard that April afternoon were not neighbors, and that coyote hunting was not a permitted use of the property.

Later, Keri told her friends about the visit from the hunters, about the bearded woman.

"Must've been Tina," said one.

"Oh, yeah. Tina. I know her," said another.

"There's gangs of coyote hunters all over this area."

Keri had no idea. She had been hiking and snowshoeing with Luna miles through the woods and along the St. George River for a year and had never encountered anyone.

But like learning a new word and then seeing it everywhere, Keri started running into coyote hunting stories wherever she went, stories about people confronting hunters in their backyards, being woken in the middle of the night by barking dogs and flashlight beams.

Hope, Maine, is a rural village of 1,300 people just inland from Penobscot Bay. Narrow roads roll between open fields, cedar swamps, and hardwood forest in a series of north-south ridgelines that separate the valleys of the St. George, Medomak, and Damariscotta rivers. At the center of town is a two-hundred-year-old general store, the kind of country store with creaky wood floors, shelves half-filled with convenience staples and canned goods, local honey and soap, work gloves and bar and chain oil. Jars of jerky sit on a wooden counter polished by generations of exchange. Solar-powered, hand-built homes are neighbors to trailers, organic farms, and apple orchards. Subarus, as common as pickup trucks, are tagged with bumper stickers that say "Hope is Hip." Yards are adorned with rebel flags or Stop Nuclear Bombs signs. Toward Appleton, eighteen dead coyotes are nailed to Raymond Gushee's front porch.

The coyote gangs have terrified many residents of this pastoral county halfway up the coast of Maine. At night, they drive their hounds through stands of white pine and alder thickets, across the backside of lumber yards and orchards, along beaver flowages and the edges of lakes. They park their pickups on the side of some road or driveway, tracking their trained hounds with Garmin Astro GPS units (manufacturer's suggested retail price $649.99) across lines of property, town, and county. Their hounds corner the coyote, but hopefully not kill it before the hunter catches up to them to shoot it.

1 The correct term is not hunting but killing, as Rick Bass pointed out in *Ninemile Wolves.* To hunt is to procure food.

This is what it's like to live in Hope: Coyote, moose, deer, and unidentifiable carcasses are regularly dumped on the edge of the farm. Spotlights flash into the windows at night as the gangs sweep through the meadows behind the house, scaring the sheep. At one in the morning, the dogs start barking; outside are more dogs barking, men's voices, idling engines, the horse and new foal chased out of the paddock. In the inevitable confrontations with startled landowners, the hunters claim their dogs can't read the No Trespassing signs. The coyote gangs turn private property into an amusement park and a slaughterhouse, because as they say, "If we don't kill coyotes and keep killing them, we'll have a catastrophe."

The eastern coyote, *Canis latrans,* is related to wolves, *Canis lupus*, and the domesticated dog, *Canis lupus familiaris*. The coyote is indigenous and unique to North America, having originated on the continent some sixty million years ago. The coyote is native to the Great Plains and the high desert, but as European colonists exterminated wolves and cleared the landscape as they moved west, coyotes expanded their range eastward. They migrated from northern Minnesota across the St. Lawrence River into northern New York, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine in the late 1930s, when French-Canadian woodsmen working in northern Maine reported seeing "les loups." The animals were larger than western coyotes, possibly a result of interbreeding with gray wolves as they moved east. The new terrain's forests made their fur take on a darker color, from almost black to grizzled shades of brown, blond, and red.

Clarence Aldous of the University of Maine reported early coyote sightings to the *Journal of Mammalogy* in 1939. The state wasted no time setting up a $25 bounty and contracting with locals to exterminate coyotes without rule or limit. But the coyote continued to spread, slowly, from north and west to south and east, from the northern forest to the coast, adapting to its new habitat along the way.

The coyote is an omnivore and a scavenger. She eats what she finds: deer, yes, especially in winter, but also snowshoe hare, squirrel, mouse, muskrat, shrews, chipmunks, grouse, turkey, berries, apples, and garbage, altering her eating habits to what food is available. By the 1970s, coyotes had expanded throughout Maine. The coyote was called a "mystery mongrel" and the "new wolf."

Today there are an estimated 12,000 coyotes in Maine.

Around the same time that coyotes were spreading through coastal Maine, people began moving into Hope, first to take part in the back-to-the-land movement of the 1970s and later to escape the suburban sprawl of the Northeast megalopolis. After a century of declining population, Hope grew from 500 people in 1970 to 1,671 in 2010.

Perhaps nothing describes the evolution of this area more than the Hope General Store's own website: "We no longer sell guns, boots or shovels but we have added wifi, solar panels, imported goods, a huge beer selection and a great deli."

Hope is hip. Hope is where the young, idealistic, or disenchanted can still buy land and start ventures like Hope Spinnery, a wind-powered fiber mill spinning alpaca wool; Hope Unleashed, a dog daycare and boarding facility; and Hope Elephants, a home for aging and injured elephants from zoos and circuses around the world. Hope is where someone like my friend Keri, who is the black sheep in her conservative, Midwestern family, can find a place to live and feel at home.

As Keri told me about the coyote gangs, about how angry they seemed, I asked her, "Where does the anger come from?"

"It's just like wolves," she said, referring to the fear of wilderness that led European settlers to kill off all the wolves in New England by 1900, the hate that humans have had for predators ever since

humans started raising the sheep, cows, goats, and chickens that attract predators. A hate that emerged in the Middle Ages as man sought a scapegoat upon which he could heap his sins of greed, lust, and deception and whose sacrificial death would be his atonement, according to Barry Lopez in *Of Wolves and Men*. To Lopez, the wolf killers had an unreasoned hatred of many things, of laws and governments and wolves, because wolves seemed better off than they were. I wonder if the coyote gangs are reacting out of this same hatred, a powerlessness to the changes surrounding them.

The rhetoric is similar, but coyotes are not the same as wolves. Coyotes don't typically have an intricate pack society like wolves; coyotes run alone or in pairs. The coyote is a jack-of-all-trades; the wolf is highly specialized to habit, habitat, and prey. The coyote is a new resident of New England; the wolf was native to Hope. And perhaps this is the problem. History, which so often provides context and cultural reference points, only goes back a few decades in the case of the coyote in Maine. In the East, there is no Native American coyote-as-trickster mythology to lend an alternative interpretation.

The coyote is not filling the niche of the wolf. That niche ceased to exist for almost a century, as humans severed the wolf's demands on and interactions with the New England landscape, at the same time as the landscape changed due to logging, insects and disease, road-building, and human attempts to "manage" wildlife. As newcomers built homes, mowed their fields, and allowed forests to regrow along the edges, coyotes flourished along with the habitat for their prey. They succeeded when so many other animals did not. Like robins, sparrows, sea gulls, crows and raccoons, the coyote's ability to exploit a landscape altered by humans has meant that it followed us, became a part of a scene we created, and thus became symbolic of it.

Ted Williams, who wrote about the early days of coyote snaring in Maine and coyote poisoning in the Midwest, explained it this way: "Maybe people hate wolves and coyotes for the same reason

wolves and coyotes hate dogs. Neither can forgive the other for being on the other side of wild or domestic." Neither wolf nor dog, coyotes are cast in a kind of purgatory, forever denied the awe we have for the wolf and refused the adoration we lavish on the family dog.

Mark Twain wrote that the coyote "is a living, breathing allegory of Want. He is always hungry. He is always poor, out of luck, and friendless...He is so spiritless and cowardly that even while his exposed teeth are pretending a threat, the rest of his face is apologizing for it."

The coyote gangs had so rattled people in Hope and the surrounding communities that a local legislator was prompted to submit a bill to amend Maine's hunting rules. In a state where ninety percent of the land is privately owned, recreational opportunity, including hunting, depends on access to private property. This traditional policy of land, water, and wildlife held in a public trust is an exception to an otherwise ruling attitude about the inalienable rights of the property owner. The bill's sponsor knew he would have to frame the issue as one of trespass, not coyotes. He asked my friend Keri if she would testify in support of the bill and tell the legislative committee her story, but she was nervous and afraid. She said she would write a letter. Anonymously.

On the first day of spring in the year after my friend's encounter with the coyote gangs, sportsmen packed a room in the state capitol building for a public hearing on the Act to Protect Owners of Private Property Against Trespass, which would require landowner permission to use bait or hunt with dogs. Prompted by alerts from the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance ("Hearing Scheduled on Unnecessary Dog Regulation") and the Maine Trappers Association ("Maine Bills Threaten Outdoor Recreation"), the hunters arrived in full dress: jeans, camouflage, flannel, ball caps. The older men wore suspenders and pilly, faded chamois shirts. The young men wore sweatshirts, John Deere t-shirts, a t-shirt proclaiming the wearer to be "one crazy redneck mudder." They arrived an hour early, lined the back wall of the hearing room, and filled most of the seats. They sat silent with their arms folded, or chatted and joked with each other.

Each had paid four dollars for a coyote-killing permit, which allowed hunting coyote year-round, except on Sunday, and twenty-four hours a day between December and August. They could use bait ("a road-killed critter or a trapped varmint carcass" was recommended by one sports writer). They could use hounds. They could use lights. From October 31 to December 31, they could use steel-jawed coil-spring traps. They could kill as many coyotes as they wanted (there was no "bag limit"). But when threatened with restricted access, they saw an entire lifestyle being taken away. At least, this is the mythology promoted by sportsmen's groups and the weapons manufacturers that support them.

And so there they were, in Augusta instead of out hunting. There was a registered guide, who "makes half his income running hounds." And the guy who guides down in New Jersey and New York, where coyotes "regularly attack cows, sheep, and children." They don't want any new laws, especially when the problem is the result of a few "bad apples" with no respect for law. Changing the law, said one hunter, "isn't going to change the DNA of the coyote." Maine has a predator problem, and if they don't hunt coyotes, they believe the problem will only get bigger. They are the only thing standing between peaceful prosperity and beastly chaos. They are doing the state a service by protecting the deer herd ("Save a deer…Kill a coyote," reasoned one t-shirt).

This is where the tale of the coyote gets complicated.

Deer populations in coastal Maine, including in Hope, where the coyote gang activity seemed to be escalating, are not in crisis. But because the emotion over coyotes is so wrapped up in the propaganda

about deer, it's hard to write about one and not the other. This was made clear that day at the public hearing, when the testimony and committee's response contained confusing and circular references to coyotes, deer, landowner rights, and sporting tradition.

Like the coyote, white-tailed deer expanded in Maine in response to landscape changes wrought by humans. Three hundred years ago, white-tailed deer lived only on the coast and river valleys where the winters were mild. Northern Maine was the domain of caribou and moose. When the Europeans arrived and started cutting trees, they cleared the way for deer to move in while simultaneously hunting the deer's primary predators—wolves and mountain lions—to near extinction. In the twentieth century, clear-cutting and logging road construction created new growth of trees and shrubs. Deer populations swelled in this predator-free pasture at the northern edge of their range, limited only by hunting and the severity of winter.

Deer can't run through deep snow. Their hooves break through crusted-over snow, and slip on glare ice. They can't nibble on frozen, buried twigs. Deer survive the North Woods winter by huddling together in dense groves of fir and cedar. So population numbers rise and fall mostly as a result of winter temperatures.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Maine's increasing coyote population stirred up the feeling that coyotes were competing with humans for deer. The state classified the coyote as a "furbearer" in 1972, which meant it could be governed by hunting laws and rules and was "consumptive wildlife" to be "harvested."

The winter 1976 issue of Maine Fish and Game magazine featured a blurry photograph of a coyote standing ankle-deep in snow, howling, with spindly trees in the background. "This scene captures the esthetic value of Maine's wildlife while emphasizing the rapidly growing need for sound wildlife management," said the caption. For more than three decades, this schizophrenic language has reappeared throughout the state government's communications about coyotes.

The Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife encouraged trapping and initiated a formal snaring policy in 1979, "to lessen predation rates around select deer wintering areas and satisfy public demand for removing coyotes."

Then the state introduced night hunting and established a formal "animal damage control program" while encouraging the public to report "coyote nuisance problems." In 1989, in an echo of the first bounty enacted against wolves in Maine in 1645, the Maine Legislature enacted a "coyote awards program," giving out prizes to those who killed the most coyotes and the largest coyote.

The state-run snaring program was suspended in 2003, because of the risk of harm to Canada lynx, which had just been placed on the Endangered Species List, but as deer numbers fluctuated, so did the pressure from sportsmen for the state to do something about "the coyote problem." In 2009, the Maine legislature extended the coyote night-hunting season through the summer.

In 2011, just four days before the hearing on the coyote hunting bill, with much fanfare, the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife released "The Game Plan for Maine's Deer" which, according to one state biologist, "puts coyote in the crosshairs."

Yet the plan concluded that the primary cause of Maine's latest deer population decline was the combination of severe winters and diminished winter cover due to changing timber harvesting practices, and that while the "sporting public" might be dissatisfied and frustrated with the declining deer population, "society" was content with the status quo. The plan also acknowledged that despite a very vocal anti-coyote sentiment, the broader public was not overwhelmingly against the coyote, and a long-term reduction of coyote numbers was probably not attainable.

Wildlife biologists, including those who work for the state, know that large numbers of coyotes can be killed—as many as seventy percent of a localized population—without any effect on their overall population size. Killing breeding-age coyotes pressures the animals to change their diet and alter their reproductive rate as dispersing juveniles quickly fill vacant territories.

Despite knowing all of this, in its Game Plan for Maine's Deer, the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife emphasized that coyote predation was "certainly one effort that we can address now." The attitude seemed to be, we can't control the climate, or the forest industry, or sprawling development, but goddammit we can kill coyotes. So one hunter editorialized, "It is time to declare war on the yodel dogs.…The coyote is the great white shark of the woodland, eating everything it can overpower."

This creed was taken up by a retired state wildlife biologist, who recommended winter as the prime killing season: "Long-legged hounds, or rugged Australian shepherds, effectively traverse deep snow and wear coyotes down after a prolonged chase. GPS units, snow sleds, and strategic placement of hunters on woods roads often prove exciting and effective. Both outfitters and groups of hunting buddies can be found working coyotes with dogs during winter in Maine."

Heeding this advice, the coyote gangs kill 40, 50, 90, who knows how many coyotes each year.

For most members of the coyote gangs, hatred for the coyote does not seem to be the result of a love for white-tailed deer. At least not around Hope, where deer populations are doing just fine. In Hope, the hatred for the coyote comes from something else.

At the public hearing on the hunting bill, one man from western Maine, "boiling over he was so mad," was "really mad at the rich people from away coming in and buying land and then posting it against trespass." Republican committee member Ralph Sarty's face reddened with rage as he listened to testimony from the man from Portland who read a lot about coyotes and about wolves, who felt no fear when he encountered a dead deer in the corner of a nature preserve, a statement which brought snickers from the sportsmen in the crowd.

Do the hunters feel that they understand the terrain better than people like my friend Keri? That their experience in the woods in pursuit of coyote trumps another's "non-consumptive" experience, trumps the experience of every other living thing? What is Raymond Gushee trying to tell the world by nailing dead coyotes to the front of his house?

The hearing resulted in some changes to coyote-killing rules. Legislators outlawed night hunting with dogs, limited hound packs to six dogs, and increased penalty fines. The state's new deer management plan included a provision to pay hunters for killing coyotes near wintering areas, setting aside $20,000 to help compensate hunters for their efforts in targeting coyotes in remote parts of Maine. The state claimed, "This is not a bounty program. We are not paying people for the number of coyotes that they kill. This is simply to defray expenses accrued by folks who are doing this."

Not long after the bill was resolved, Keri said she heard that Tina and a bunch of other coyote gang members relocated farther north, possibly because it was getting harder to hunt in Hope or the coyotes were getting scarce, or maybe they wanted to take advantage of the state's compensation plan. Raymond Gushee's porch was empty, and the summer people would soon arrive. The night was dark again, and quiet, except for the coyotes howling beneath the stars.