

Suburbs warned about 'zombie' coyote

Residents told to stay away from what appear to be neglected dogs

By KATE THAYER AND GRACE WONG
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Reported sightings in the suburbs of sick-looking canines could be so-called zombie coyotes.

The wild animals are believed to be suffering from a contagious disease called sarcoptic mange, and the ghoulish nickname comes from the condition's effects on behavior and appearance, including fur loss and skin problems.

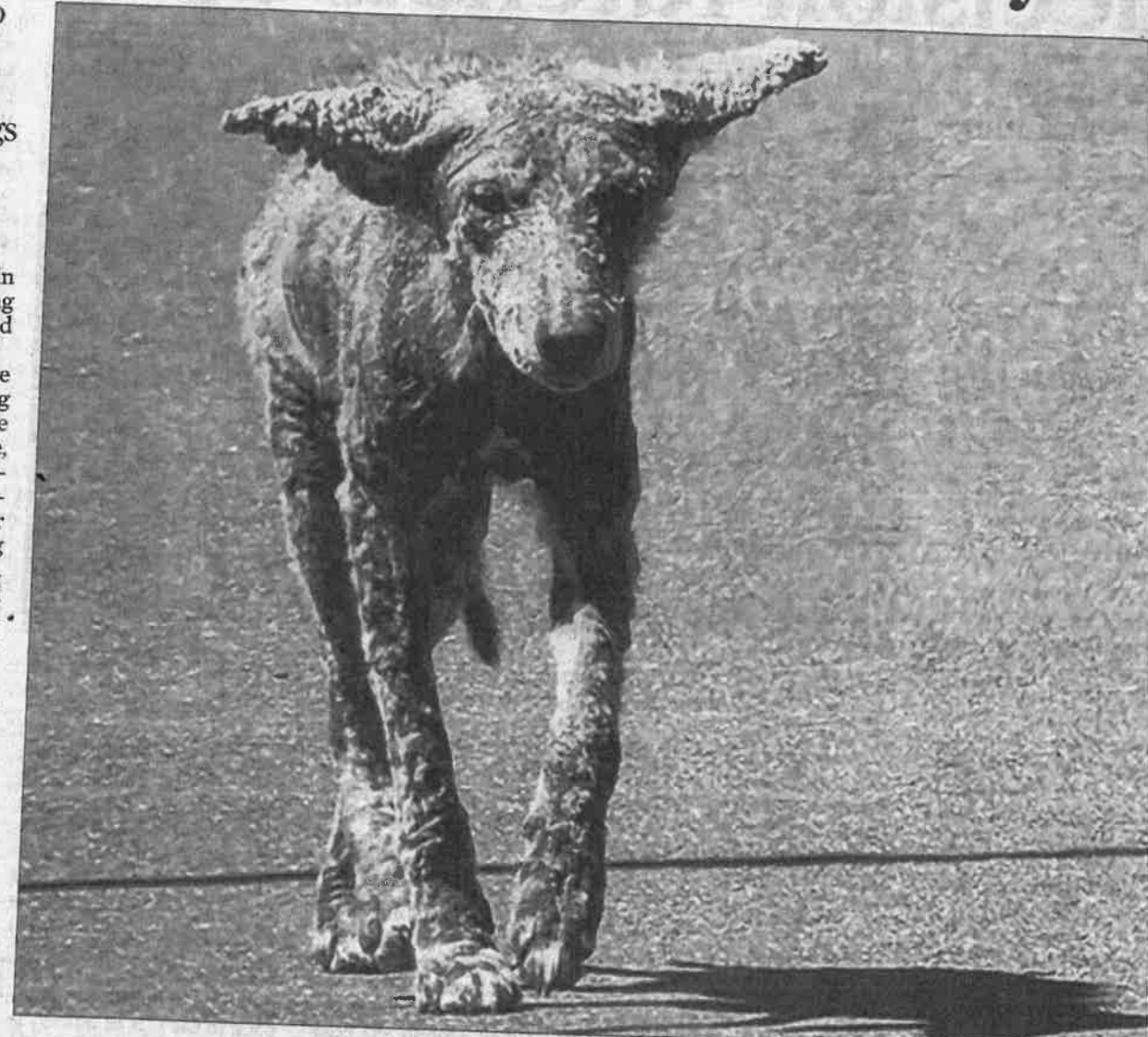
Sightings have popped up in northwest and southwest portions of Cook County, said Chris Anchor, senior wildlife biologist for the Forest Preserves of Cook County, who studies coyotes as part of the Urban Coyote Research program and whose team has come across ailing coyotes.

And the Hanover Park Police Department issued an alert last week, advising people and pets to stay away from the animals.

The department said on its Facebook page that it received several reports from citizens "concerned about what appear to be malnourished or neglected stray dogs. These are NOT lost pets, but are in fact coyotes."

The alert reported that sarcoptic mange is on the rise in urban coyote populations, and the condition is what can eventually have the animals "looking like some sort of 'zombie' dog."

Despite the mange's macabre effects, the condition is rarely life-threatening, including in unusual cases where it spreads to household pets through direct contact with a coyote, Anchor said. Pets can be treated with medication from a veterinarian and typically make a full recovery, he said.



Sarcoptic mange, shown in a coyote in California, does not affect aggression, an expert said. WILDLIFE EMERGENCY SERVICES 20

One risk for infected wildlife is that the loss of fur can prevent animals from generating enough body heat, Anchor said. But even when coyotes are infected in colder months, many are "smart enough" to seek shelter in places like backyard compost heaps or find other ways to stay warm, he said.

Rebecca Dmytryk of Wildlife Emergency Services, a volunteer service in central California that has tracked coyotes sick with sarcoptic mange in that region, said the condition is probably spreading through coyote populations because they're social animals with family units.

The infection can also

affect the animals' vision, prompting them to look for food in daylight hours, according to the Hanover Park police post.

The disease does not make the animal more violent, Anchor said.

Still, while coyotes aren't normally aggressive and typically avoid humans, experts discourage residents from trying to attract the animals and advise people not to leave food out and to secure outdoor garbage cans.

Otherwise, Anchor said, "that barrier (between the animals and people) will break down."

Stephanie Touzalin, a naturalist with the DuPage County Forest Preserve District's Willowbrook

Wildlife Center in Glen Ellyn, said pets would have to come into physical contact to be infected with mange from a wild animal. A pet won't be infected simply because of a diseased animal passing through a yard.

Touzalin also said fall is a time of year when many young animals are leaving their home territories, which makes sightings more common. The disease typically shows up every few years and spreads across coyote populations, Anchor said.

Mark Romano, a wildlife control specialist, said he has seen more mange this summer than in the last four or five years.

The culprit is overpopu-

lation, he said. Although there are strategies to combat this, they are expensive, and most municipal agencies don't have the money for it.

Instead, Romano advised residents to call authorities or a private trapper to deal with problem wildlife encounters.

"Don't try to handle a problem yourself, because you don't know what the animal is going to do," he said.

"You never know how a wild animal will interact with a human being. You can never predict it."

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