

# Eye on Multnomah County Wildlife Services' Scare Tactics in Urban and Suburban Portland

By Bob Sallinger

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Many people who know about the US Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services (WS) program, think of it as primarily a livestock protection agency. However, over the course of the past several years WS has found new and sadly fertile ground into which to expand their operations. They have brought their leghold traps, body and neck snares, sodium cyanide devices, and a mountain of misinformation and deceit to the urban/suburban environment in an increasingly desperate attempt to justify their anachronistic existence.

In and around Portland, Oregon, WS has sought contracts to do predator eradication for a variety of local communities and agencies. In the tri-county area that makes up the greater Portland area, they have ongoing contracts to work in Clackamas and Washington Counties. They tried, but failed, to obtain a similar contract to work in Multnomah County in 1996. They present themselves as "wildlife experts" equipped to educate the public about how to coexist with wildlife and to resolve urban wildlife problems when they occur. The reality, unfortunately, has been something quite different.

Rather than educating the public about how to coexist with wildlife, WS has instead exploited the general

public's fears, frustrations and misperceptions regarding wildlife, and particularly predator species. No one is debating that there is a genuine need to educate the public about the "dos" and "don'ts" of coexisting with wildlife. But instead of focusing on ways to minimize conflict (removing potential attractants, housing pets indoors, etc.), WS has met these concerns with fear mongering. Examples in the print media abound.

## **WS perpetuates fear and misinformation in the media**

In a March 25, 1996, story in *The Oregonian*, WS district supervisor Rod Kruschke suggested that "people need to be aware that small children are the size of [coyote] prey." A Gresham *Outlook* article had Kruschke again discussing the risks coyotes pose to children and then discussing attacks in the wild areas of Canada. In an August 1998 *Oregonian* article Dave Williams, Oregon Director of WS, suggested that when pets vanish without a trace "it is more probable that they were killed by a coyote or a raccoon than a Buick."

The fact is that a coyote will take cats and small dogs, but coyotes are a minor threat among the many more prominent risks faced by free-roaming pets (cars, poisons, disease, other free-roaming pets, etc.). The risk of coyote attacks on humans is incredibly small. Spiders, goats and jellyfish account for more injuries in the

United States each year than do coyotes. There has never been a documented killing of a human by a coyote in Oregon. In fact, there is only one human death attributed to coyotes over the course of the entire history of the United States.

WS has used legitimate requests from the general public for information regarding predators as a springboard to gain access to the ears of local politicians. Rather than offering common sense solutions to problems and sound biological information to alleviate unfounded concerns, WS instead has encouraged members of the general public to lobby local politicians to hire WS to eradicate local predator populations. After all is said and done, WS claims that it was the community that came to them rather than the other way around.

Kruschke's comments in 1996 in the *Southwest Connection* and *The Oregonian* serve as cases in point. In the *Southwest Connection*, Kruschke offers WS's phone number and then pointedly states that WS has a coyote extermination program but its "hands are tied because the county doesn't fund the program." In *The Oregonian*, Kruschke again gives his phone number, suggests that small children are the size of coyote prey, and states that it would require \$50,000 to contract with WS to resolve the coyote problems in Multnomah County.

The good news is that in communities in which there has been →

public involvement in the development of local predator management policy, the decision has invariably been made to focus on education and coexistence rather than funding the ineffective, expensive and inhumane activities of WS.

Three recent situations serve as case studies:

### **Case Study #1: Portland Int'l Airport**

In October of 1995, a member of the general public walking her dog in a field adjacent to Portland International Airport discovered leghold traps set by WS to capture coyotes that had been digging under airport fencing and running onto runways. A large public outcry ensued and the Port of Portland which manages the airport responded by creating a Wildlife Management Specialist position and convening a citizens' advisory panel to help develop a more acceptable and humane policy. They were also concerned that after paying WS to capture and destroy 10 coyotes, the problem of coyotes on the runway continued to occur. WS was asked to draft an environmental assessment that would take into account these concerns.

In January of 1996, WS submitted a draft environmental assessment which stated: "the diversity of habitat surrounding the airport and the abundance of wildlife promotes wildlife conflicts.... Effective techniques would include the use of firearms and pyrotechnics to scare birds... lethal shooting of target birds entering aircraft safety zones, and trapping and euthanizing overabundant target species, such as coyotes, starlings, crows, gulls and raccoons that pose immediate hazards to aviation. WS would also have available body or neck snares, leghold traps, calling and shooting, or the M-44 sodium-cyanide device."

The Port of Portland promptly hired a private consultant to develop and implement a different plan. The installation of ground fencing alleviated the coyote problem and no coyotes have been destroyed since the Port ceased to contract with WS.

### **Case Study # 2: Multnomah County**

In 1996, Multnomah County Animal Control, under intense pressure from WS to contract with them, decided to hire an independent biologist named Allan May to assess whether a need really existed. May's report, "Urban Coyotes in Multnomah County Ecosystems," came to five important conclusions:

- Coyotes, while they did prey on cats, pose a minimal risk to humans;
- Previous attempts elsewhere to eliminate coyotes had been ineffective and extremely expensive;
- Domestic animals would be placed at risk by current coyote eradication methods;
- The majority of people reporting coyote sightings either had a favorable (61 percent) or neutral (26 percent) view on these animals;
- Education and research are fundamentally important in "reducing encounters... in urban environment... [and to] lessen the misperceptions associated with their existence."

The report was instrumental in Multnomah County's decision to focus on education rather than elimination. WS was not awarded a contract.

### **Case Study #3: Lake Oswego**

During the spring and summer of 1997, residents near Southwood Park in Lake Oswego, a suburb of Portland had several sightings of coyotes and noted the disappearance of several cats. One resident noted potentially aggressive behavior exhibited by one coyote. However this resident

failed to show up to testify at public hearings and the account was of dubious quality.

In an unannounced hearing, WS suggested that the coyotes presented a high risk to humans. Police Chief Les Youngbar, relying on the advice of WS, was quoted in the local paper stating that "the risk of having a small child or an adult with a pet on a leash attacked appears to be a real possibility." WS lobbied for and was hired by the Lake Oswego City Council to eradicate coyotes in Southwood Park using neck snares.

An outcry by the citizens of Lake Oswego forced the city council to revisit the issue at their September meeting. An editorial in the Lake Oswego paper just prior to this meeting stated that humans "have very little to fear from coyotes," and suggested that studying the number of people killed by coyotes was equivalent to "studying the likelihood of rhinos ramming Oregonians... It doesn't happen." The editorial went on to question the expense, effectiveness and risk to humans and pets inherent in neck snaring coyotes and requested a "solution with moderation."

Well over 100 coyote supporters, but just a handful of people in favor of eradication, attended the September hearing. At this hearing, WS employees Jeff Brent and Mark Lytle testified twice that dogs caught in neck snares typically would not struggle and would not be injured. Despite the dictates of common sense, WS Director David Williams

**When a pet does stray into a snare, it is our experience that it does not fight and is fine when released."**

— David Williams  
Oregon Director,  
Wildlife Services

would stand by this statement. In a letter responding to the Predator Defense Institute dated October 29, 1997, Williams wrote, "when a pet does stray into a snare, it is our experience that it does not fight and is fine when released." But from documents PDI obtained from WS under the Freedom of Information Act, during the very same time period that WS made these statements, the two agents that had testified in Lake Oswego – Brent and Lytle – were at a ranch in Estacada, a community less than 25 miles away, setting traps in which eight dogs would be captured and three would die.

Brent and Lytle also twice insisted in their testimony that WS could

d o c u m e n t  
"many" and  
"several" in-  
stances in the  
Portland area  
in which pets  
being walked  
on leashes by  
their owners  
had been ag-  
gressively at-  
tacked by  
coyotes. When  
pressed on this  
issue by Port-

land Audubon Society and PDI, WS could not document a single instance in which this had actually occurred.

### Common sense prevails

Happily, common sense won the day in Lake Oswego. The City Council voted unanimously to focus on education rather than eradication. Lake Oswego Mayor Bill Klammer was quoted in the Lake Oswego paper as stating, "I made a dire mistake at the previous council meeting. After spending time reading and learning about these animals, I am firmly convinced that coexistence is the only answer."

Unfortunately not all local situations have turned out so well. In many cases, WS is hired quietly and goes about their business unnoticed until somebody stumbles upon their activities or something goes dramatically wrong. In West Linn, a town that borders Lake Oswego, WS was hired in 1996, and killed 10 coyotes before it was reported in the mass media. Today, West Linn has a community service officer that deals with their wildlife issues. When she started on the job, Officer Deets spoke with Lytle but was put off by his suggestions to use what she considered to be "inhumane" neck snares and to secretly set traps where the public wouldn't find out about them. She has ceased working with WS altogether.

A particularly gruesome WS project occurred in the town of Estacada in Clackamas County. From documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, PDI learned that between October of 1990 and September of 1997, WS agents visited one sheep ranch in Estacada a staggering 281 times. To compensate this rancher for a documented \$2,730 in sheep lost to predation, WS used neck snares, leghold traps and M-44 sodium cyanide devices to deliberately destroy 55 coyotes, two bobcats, and a mountain lion. WS also unintentionally caught and killed a black bear, a crow, and three dogs. Five more dogs were trapped, but survived and were released. A neighbor who was drawn to the site by the stench of rotting flesh, discovered the operation while out searching for his own dogs.. He found a Golden Retriever puppy dangling by its neck from one of the neck snares, barely alive.

### Neighbors never knew

In this instance, WS failed to adequately notify the neighbors in the vicinity of the operation of their activities. They also failed to adequately

notify local hospitals of their use of sodium-cyanide poison. In their attempts to remove evidence of their activities prior to arrival of the local media, they accidentally left several traps behind, and when the traps later were discovered, they claimed that the livestock had moved them. Their activities clearly contradicted a March 25, 1995, *Oregonian* article that quoted WS's Rod Krischke as saying that his agency "avoids the poisons and traps that kill many animals," as well as WS's testimony at the Lake Oswego hearing that dogs caught in their snares are not harmed.

### No Community Immune

Do not assume that your community is immune to the activities of WS. As WS comes under increasing attack and budgets are tightened, the need to both justify and fund their continued existence will grow more acute. Urban areas provide a hotbed of wildlife misperceptions and a viable funding base. Many urban governments lacking wildlife expertise will defer blindly to WS. Despite the fact that many who work within the federal fish and wildlife agencies will voice their concerns only when off the record, there are policies and protocols in place for channeling concerns about problem wildlife to WS.

The only solution is vigilance. ■

## What you can do

Don't assume that your community is immune to the activities of Wildlife Services.

Contact PDI with information regarding their activities in your urban community so that we can follow up.

Write your Representative and explain why you want WS's lethal predator control program abolished.

### Oregon Wildlife Services "avoids the poisons and traps that kill many animals."

— Rod Krischke  
Oregon District  
Director,  
Wildlife Services