



The coyote is by far the most plentiful predator in Texas and also one of the most controversial.

ARE PREDATORS NECESSARY?

Article by TAMRA BOLTON

“One cannot love game and hate predators...the land is one organism.” This quote from renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold gives us the answer to the question, “Are predators necessary?” yet leaves us wondering how we can balance our love of game with the problems predators often present.

For most of Texas’ recorded history, man has been dealing with the challenges of sharing the landscape with these often feared “adversaries.” Since man is the only real predator to the wolf, bear, cougar, coyote and bobcat, ultimately, their fate lies in his hands.

Historically, man has opted to eradicate predators instead of seeing them as an integral part of the ecology. In Texas, man successfully eradicated red and gray wolves and grizzly bears, and he almost wiped out our native black bear, cougar and jaguar populations. People protecting their herds and flocks also managed to put a significant dent in the raptor population until passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty of 1918 which prohibits the killing of native birds of prey. We now realize that killing predators, such as birds of prey, sometimes has the opposite effect we are trying to achieve.

“Many of the raptors shot a century ago feasted more on rodents and mid-sized animals which, in turn, ate more ground-nesting bird eggs and nestlings than the raptors ate in adult quail or other birds,” said Cliff Shackleford, State Ornithologist with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. “Thus, these folks were doing the exact opposite of what was intended—they upset any attempts at nature’s balance.”

Isn’t that what we as Texas landowners and defenders of wildlife want... balance? Yet, when it comes to predators, viewpoints are sometimes anything but balanced. Usually the predator debate



results in two camps: “Get rid of them all.” Or, “save them all,” with neither camp offering a sensible long-term plan.

“We all have our biases,” Dr. Dale Rollins, professor and retired Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service specialist said. “The key predator to a sheep rancher is the coyote; to me, as a quail manager, it’s not the coyote, who is a left-hand ally because it kills smaller ‘mesocarnivores’ like skunks and foxes, which are more damaging to quail populations than coyotes.”

So, if the answers are not clear and the debate divided, how do we deal with the question of predators in our environment? We know that some type of predator control is necessary in many cases, but blanket recommendations based on observations in just one area or region are untenable. In dealing with wildlife, managers and biologists have learned that the answers to the predator question are situational. Many times, we are too quick to blame predation when certain species decline. Other variables such as hunting, drought, human encroachment/conflict or weather-related phenomena may also account for losses of game birds and other animals.

While wildlife management has come a long way in recent years, many people still view predators as villains due to fear or ignorance of the predator’s role in nature’s plan.

“Fear has always played a role in the treatment and public perception of predators, especially large predators, such as black bears and cougars,” said TPWD Mammologist Jonah Evans. “Education is the key.”

In the past, predator control campaigns were employed to eradicate certain species such as the coyote in order to increase other wildlife species for game management. However, many wildlife experts and landowners have found that eradication is not usually the answer.

“Any attempt to remove predators will only pave the way for more damage later,” Schackelford said.

If we are to maintain the health of our wild game species, we must consider the role predators, both mammalian and avian, play in the natural world.



Photo courtesy of Pixabay

The cougar or mountain lion is a feared predator, but is rarely seen by humans and prefers to steer clear of most encounters.



Photo courtesy of Pixabay

Hawks, owls and other raptors are protected by law. To help deter these avian predators, habitat improvement for the prey species is a must.





Photo courtesy of Pixabay



Bobcats are found throughout most of Texas and help keep the smaller predators and rodents in check.

Photo courtesy of Photo Collections



The raccoon is one of the deadliest predators to ground-nesting game birds such as wild turkey and quail.

Photo courtesy of Pixabay



Foxes are often credited with plundering ground nests, but they also keep the rodent population in check, which are often nest predators too.

“Predators have always been with us,” Shackelford said. “They’re an essential part of our environment by attempting to keep balance and order with numbers of available prey. Without predators like Barn Owls, for instance, farmers would be overrun with pesky rodents. Predators keep certain species in-check, plus they remove the old, weak and sickly.”

It’s the old “survival of the fittest” law at work, helping keep the gene pool of prey animals healthy and strong. While some may consider a predators’ work cruel, it is a necessary element in keeping nature’s balance and in many cases keeping the landscape healthy as well. If you’ve ever seen a mountainside or a meadow overgrazed by deer or elk, you understand the damage that overpopulation can wreak on a fragile environment. Predators are nature’s way of protecting the land too.

“Predators are important in nature—without them, the scale could tip the wrong way,” said Schackelford.

WHAT TO DO?

Even if we agree that predators have a necessary role in the landscape, how do we deal with them on our own property? And, how can we implement a healthy wildlife management plan that includes some type of predator control?

There are proactive ways to contend with unwanted predators, which in some cases need to be removed or discouraged.

“Predation is always a contentious topic, one plus one doesn’t always equal two,” said Rollins. “My viewpoint is that one needs to use ‘defensive’ strategies and then follow up with ‘offensive’ strategies as needed. Defensive strategies, such as identifying habitat deficiencies and correcting these problem areas, should always be the first choice when trying to deal with predators.”

Rollins said that wildlife management’s role is not “simply producing more wildlife,” it is to be responsible and ethical protectors of our native resources and ecology.

To weigh the pros and cons of predator management, here are some questions to consider:

- Is predation actually limiting your wildlife population?



- Will your habitat support more game if predators are controlled?
- If more game is produced, how will that surplus be utilized?

To form a sensible predator control/management plan, you must know your property and the predators that frequent it and have a clear objective for your game management goals. There are several methods you can use to identify the predators and their activity on your land.

- Learn to identify your predators by tracks and scat;
- Use game cameras to monitor movements;
- Learn to properly investigate kill sites to determine predation or other causes.

After you have a good idea of the number and species of predators on your property, you can then decide if defensive measures can be implemented or if you need to use aggressive offensive measures first.

One defensive strategy would be to improve your habitat for the wildlife prey species you want to protect. Do you have enough cover for the species? Is the cover too far apart for safe travel (for example, proper number of bunch grass clumps per acre and dense brush for quail, corridors for deer and turkey, but not enough cover over open range)? Are there adequate watering sites? Or, are they limited to one spot, making it easier for predators to attack? Are your feeders attracting predators and thereby producing higher populations/concentrations (i.e., raccoons and opossums) of the very species you want to control? Another defensive strategy would be to employ fencing that would help deter certain predator species. Could live traps be used to remove some unwanted predators? By improving your

habitat and using fencing and/or traps, you can gradually help balance the predator/prey relationship.

However, you may also have to go on the offensive, using such methods as lethal-type trapping, calling/shooting and aerial gunning. While these methods can be highly effective, they can be time consuming and expensive.

Many times, a combination of habitat improvement and limited predator removal is the best way to maintain the health of your wildlife. Remember, what might work for one operation may not be best for yours; predator control must always be considered on a case by case basis.

One thing to remember when considering your predator management plan is “man’s intervention into nature always has a cost,” concluded Shackelford. “Early settlers did too good a job removing top predators from Texas, namely gray wolves, red wolves and mountain lions. These species, in turn, kept lower-ranked predators in-check. For instance, coyotes were not found in the eastern third of Texas when red wolves were around. So, there is even a hierarchy within various species of predators (bigger species beat up on smaller species in the name of reducing competition).”

One result of man’s earlier intervention is the overabundance of coyotes we now have throughout Texas, including East Texas. It is worth noting that whatever species you are trying to protect or control, you are responsible for any measures you take; that’s why educating and informing ourselves and others is so important... not just for us, but for the wild things entrusted to our care. 

