In the 20-odd years since it first crossed the sea ice on the Gulf of St. Lawrence, probably from Cape Breton Island, the coyote (Canis latrans) has completely colonized Newfoundland. This amazingly adaptable, indeed shape-shifting, canid has spread to every corner of the island, to the point where hunters this year renewed their call for a coyote-population control plan to conserve the caribou herds.

“We estimate that 60 percent of moose and caribou calves are destroyed each year by coyotes,” says Bernie Rumble, western Newfoundland director of the Newfoundland and Labrador Wildlife Federation, a 22,000-member organization representing the province’s hunters and sport fishermen. The federation has been calling for the provincial government to protect the caribou in particular, whose numbers are in decline.

“I think coyotes are well established now,” says Rumble. “I’m doubtful you can get rid of them. But I think you can control them. We’re after a program where there’s a bounty on them and people can destroy them.”

How many coyotes are out there? Mike McGrath, a senior biologist with the wildlife division of the province’s Department of Environment and Conservation, tentatively pegs the province’s coyote population at between 5,000 and 10,000 animals. He is hoping to derive a more accurate number through a study launched in 2005, which includes a telemetry component to track the behaviour of 17 radio-collared coyotes. As for caribou, the Department of Environment and Conservation says a survey is underway to count the island’s caribou, due to reports of a decline. It will not issue a hard number until the survey is done.

A few generations earlier, coyotes would have had no experience with the ocean, but evidence now suggests that some of these protean newcomers have even learned to hunt seals pups in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. McGrath expects coyotes to continue crossing the ice whenever it’s thick enough to bear them.

“We know they disperse hundreds of kilometres,” he says. “They could travel here from Nova Scotia in a couple of days, easy. And, yes, they do eat caribou. By the mid-1990s, we started to see significant declines in the caribou population.”

The study has found that coyotes are responsible for 15 to 20 percent of the predation of caribou calves. But lynx kill an equal number, says McGrath, to say nothing of bears, which take about 50 percent of all calves. Coyotes in Newfoundland also rely on scavenged carcasses of caribou and moose.

Over their 100-year migration from the American Southwest to the Newfoundland barrens, coyotes have interbred with eastern wolves, acquiring genes to nearly double in size. While their diminutive Western cousins still eat mostly berries and small rodents, the hybridized coyotes on the Atlantic seaboard routinely hunt deer, sometimes even adult caribou. If there were ever an argument for the wonders of natural selection, the coyote would surely win hands down.

“Nowhere in North America have bounties or persecution caused the elimination of coyotes,” says McGrath. “Why would you even try?”

Many Newfoundlanders blame the coyote for declining caribou numbers. Hunters want an island-wide cull, while biologists say the wily newcomers can’t be eliminated. 

BY SCOTT GARDINER

Coyotes on ice

Many Newfoundlanders blame the coyote for declining caribou numbers. Hunters want an island-wide cull, while biologists say the wily newcomers can’t be eliminated. 

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