

Wolves in Norton - not as strange at it sounds

Linda S. Kollett

On the way to visit her grandmother, Little Red Riding Hood encountered a wolf in the forest. The rest of the story is a lesson on not dawdling in the dangerous woods, and yelling loudly when you need help. Luckily the ending was satisfactory for Little Red Riding Hood, Grandma and the wolf.

There are no eastern gray wolves in the Norton woods. Wild wolves were declared extinct in Massachusetts in 1840, although there have been infrequent sightings in the western part of the state. So when you go for a walk in the woods in Norton you won't encounter any wolves – or will you? Let's take a look.

We can go into the woods to look for the lone wolf. In this case, the lone wolf is a tree – also known as a field form tree. Some folks call it a wolf tree as in "lone wolf," the only one of its kind in the area.

Foresters called them wolf trees because they thought the trees were using valuable resources and should be cut down (or killed, as in the case of wolves). Now many realize that these old trees provide important animal habitats, and they are allowed to remain. Found deep in the woods, they have low wide-spreading branches, a shape very different from tall canopy trees with few lower branches. Wolf trees are trees that started out in the middle of a field. Their shape is due to unobstructed sunshine in the field and no competing nearby trees.

If you time-traveled back to the Norton of the 1800s, most of what we know as woodlands would be farmland. Farmers often left a tree here and there in a grazing area to provide shade for animals on hot days. When the fields were abandoned, old-field succession began and eventually the field became a woodlot. But the lone wolf tree remained, surrounded by new woody growth.

We can also look for wolves at night in the litter on the forest floor. These wolves are wolf spiders. If you want to go on a wolf (spider) hunt, take a flashlight along. These large, long-legged spiders are well camouflaged but their big eyes glow in the light from a flashlight. It seems that they were originally called wolf spiders because scientists thought they hunted in packs. Now we know that they hunt alone.

Wolf spiders do not build webs; some live in burrows, others under rocks. And some of them sneak into houses when the weather turns cold. They choose locations that have a good supply of food, usually dark damp areas. Wolf spiders eat harmful insects and thus play an important role in the ecosystem. Their bite is annoying but they don't try to attack people. They have poor eyesight despite their 8 eyes, and can easily mistake a finger for an insect. One of the most noticeable things about a wolf spider is that in most species the female carries her egg sac along with her attached to the end of her abdomen. When the baby wolf spiders are ready to hatch she can open the egg sac with her jaws.

And finally, there are the coyotes. Coyotes (*Canis larins*) were not found east of the Mississippi River before the early 20th century. Western coyotes are relatively small, and the coyotes that appeared in the east were a bit larger.



Coyotes like this one are true suburban and urban “wolves” as they have been found in all sorts of communities, including cities, throughout the US.

Scientists suspect that the coyotes made their way east the long way, up into Canada and then back down into the United States. On the way they seem to have mated with wolves, as genetic tests showed that wolf genes were mixed in with coyote genes in all the samples tested.

Coyotes do well in urban areas and they flourish in areas where true wolves have been eliminated. They are what are called opportunistic eaters and their diet includes small mammals, birds, snakes, invertebrates and garbage. They are true suburban and urban “wolves” as they have been found in all sorts of communities, including cities, throughout the US. Their calls are easily recognizable and are heard more and more frequently in Norton.

Land Preservation Society (LPS) of Norton maintains trails in several woodlands in Norton – is it time to go on a wolf hunt?

For information about some of these locations, visit our web site www.nortonlandpreservation.org. You will find information about one of our projects there, too. The project, the Wild Backyards of Norton, aims to get the town of Norton certified as a Community Wildlife Habitat.

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