



Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre

Living with Coyotes

Not that many years ago, the land on which our community now stands was home to abundant wildlife. Coyotes, like many species, have adapted to live with us. They didn't have much choice given that development has eliminated forests, meadows and farmers' fields at a relentless pace in Ottawa. So, like cities throughout North America, we are having to adapt to living with wildlife, including coyotes. Fortunately, it's not difficult, once we learn more about coyotes' biology and behaviour as well as practical tips to avoid potential conflicts.

Coyote Biology

The coyote (*Canis latrans*) is a medium-sized member of the dog family that includes wolves and foxes. Coyotes are usually grayish brown with reddish tinges behind the ears and around the face, but coloration can vary from a silver-gray to black.

The Eastern Coyote that lives in this area is a hybrid between western coyotes and eastern (Algonquin) wolves and weighs on average between 30 to 45 pounds. Although they can breed with domestic dogs, producing "coy-dogs", it is generally rare.

Coyotes are highly social. The majority belong to a pack that is led by an alpha male and female. The alpha pair is monogamous and the average pack size is four to seven individuals. Although coyotes live in family groups, they usually travel and hunt alone.



They are an extremely intelligent and adaptive species and are thus able to take advantage of a wide range of habitat.

Mating takes place in February with, on average, four to six pups born in April and May. The den is normally a burrow in the soil. Both parents are involved in raising the young, and the dog (male) assumes the responsibility of bringing food to the den for the bitch and the young. The growing pups are very playful, much like domestic pups. Even the adults show affection among themselves and occasionally high spirits, tossing sticks about.

For many of us, the coyote's 'song', a series of yelps, followed by a falsetto howl, is a stirring vestige of one of our last connections to nature.

Coyote Behaviour

Understanding why a species acts in a certain way is crucial to responding in an informed way. Fear is furthered by ignorance. And, what we fear, we kill.

This is certainly the case with coyotes whose persecution is legendary. And, it is not only proven to be unwarranted but also ineffective in solving any perceived or real conflicts.

The first myth is that coyotes prey on people's pets. It's true that if we leave a cat out overnight or a small dog off leash in a natural area, we risk losing them to a coyote but, more often than not, it's a fisher that is the culprit as far as missing cats are concerned.

An extensive study on urban coyotes showed that the foundation of their diet was small rodents, primarily mice and voles, augmented by rabbits, hares and deer. Surprisingly, 23% of their diet consists of fruit, one of the reasons they are often seen around apple orchards or properties with crab apple trees in the fall.

Although they are a diurnal (daytime) species, to avoid conflict with humans, coyotes can and do change their peak activity levels to night.

Coyote sightings over the late fall and winter months increase for several reasons. Without foliage on our trees and shrubs, they are more easily seen and they also have to extend their foraging times and territory to compensate for the fact that food is harder to find. But the biggest reason is that they are simply following their primary diet – mice – and, as you know, mice move closer to our heated homes during the winter.

Many people are grateful to see coyote tracks in the snow around the perimeter of our homes because we know they are keeping mice in check, they are not after women and children!

Coyotes are susceptible to sarcoptic mange, consisting of microscopic mites that cause itching and loss of hair. This can have deadly consequences, particularly during the winter months, as it severely limits the animal's ability to maintain body heat. However, it is easily treatable with a parasitic product, ivermectin. People have successfully treated coyotes with mange by putting a dose of ivermectin in food bait on their property once a week for a few weeks.

Coyote Contribution to a Healthy Ecosystem

A number of studies are teaching us the significant role coyotes contribute to biodiversity. As an apex predator, a coyote has the ability to control all species below it on the food chain, a phenomenon referred to as the top down effect. Removing coyotes from a habitat creates a huge imbalance that threatens ecological stability.

For example, coyotes control of rodent populations is of great benefit not only to agriculture but also to homeowners. Coyotes presence has also been found to have a positive effect on ground-nesting birds by keeping other predators, such as raccoons and skunks, at bay.



Attempts to control coyote populations by culling often lead to the opposite effect, thereby increasing overall pack size. If either the alpha male or female is killed, the resulting effect can be ovulation in all breeding-age females and an increase in both the numbers of litters and number of pups per litter.

Also, the resulting disturbance on the social structure of the pack can lead to more human-wildlife conflicts as less experienced coyotes will go for easier prey, including people's pets.

As for coyotes being a threat to people, consider that only two humans have ever been killed by a coyote in all recorded history. In contrast, millions of children are bitten by dogs annually in North America and, on average, twenty human deaths are attributed to dogs each year in the U.S.

Rather than the senseless slaughter of coyotes, we need to take the small precautions that come with having the privilege of still having abundant natural areas and wildlife around us.

Homeowners need to ensure that they don't intentionally or unintentionally feed coyotes by securing garbage, cleaning up around bird feeders and practicing responsible pet ownership by not leaving cats or dogs unattended outside. The latter is particularly important during the fall and winter months when coyotes are having to range farther for food, tracking the mice that move closer to our homes.

