



Footfills

Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

The Coyote

The coyote (*Canis latrans*) is a widespread resident of North America. Much of its territory has been rapidly altered by man. Coyotes have survived and even flourished despite decades of hunting and poisoning. Versatility is the key to the coyote's success. A true opportunist, they eat a wide variety of small birds and mammals. They may be active during day or night, but do the majority of their hunting between dusk and dawn.

Coyotes are very interesting animals to observe because of their physical prowess. They are the best runners of the Canidae family, usually cruising at 25 miles per hour. In short spurts, they can reach speeds in excess of 40 miles per hour. They stalk their prey, then pounce upon the victim. These pounces can be up to 14 feet long. They are also great swimmers, and often enter rivers after water-borne prey.

As a member of the family Canidae, coyotes are dog-like in appearance. In fact, they have been known to mate with domestic dogs. The resulting hybrid, called a "coydog," is occasionally found in the wild. Coyotes have a sandy brown colored coat, a bushy tail with a black tip, and ears with yellowish points. Males are usually larger than females, and weigh up to 40 pounds. As with all other canines their claws are non-retractable. Coyote footprints are therefore easily distinguishable from those of a bobcat.

The basic social unit of the coyotes is the mated pair. Like other wild dogs, they usually live in packs. These packs include three to seven individuals, typically consisting of the mated pair along with their offspring. The family will travel, eat and sleep together. The pack has a well-defined territory of about eight square miles, commonly marked by urine. These scent marks establish boundaries which are seldom encroached upon by other coyotes.

Coyotes utilize rocky outcrops, caves, hollow logs, and loose soil for den sites. They tend to mate from February to May. One litter of pups is born to a female each year, after a 63 day gestation period. A litter usually consists of six or seven. They are cared for by both the male and the female. The male is very loyal to his mate, and will stay with the same female for several years.

Perhaps the most well-known fact about the coyote is their wide range of vocal talent. In fact, the scientific name *Canis latrans* means "barking dog." They have about ten gradations of sounds, including woofs, barks, howls,



yips, yaps, and yelps. Their howls allow other coyotes to know their location, and serve to reunite them if they are separated. Their familiar prolonged howls on a moonlit night can evoke an eerie feeling.

The coyote feeds on a wide variety of animals. Usually they prefer small mammals, such as mice, ground squirrels, gophers, and rabbits. Other prey includes insects, carrion, fruit, and the occasional bird or deer fawn.

Coyotes are intelligent and will often team up with each other while hunting. They will either chase the prey in relays or ambush it. All individuals involved share in the kill. Sometimes a single coyote will go hunting with a badger (*Taxidea taxus*). In these instances, the team will use the coyote's sense of smell to sniff out a burrowing creature, while the badger's incredible digging power is utilized to extract the prey. Again, the victim is shared.

The coyote's role as a scavenger plays a major part in the delicate balance of nature. They are especially effective in keeping rodent populations in check. If a coyote were to feed solely on mice, a single animal could consume in excess of 10,000 mice every year. If there were no coyotes in the American wilderness, the resulting overpopulation of rodents could critically endanger the ecosystems of the country.

Despite their benefits, coyotes have a troubled relationship with humans because they will kill and eat domestic stock, particularly sheep. As a result, coyotes are one of the most hunted animals in North America. More than 100,000 of them are trapped, poisoned, or shot annually in the United States. Many people fail to understand the important role the coyote plays in the environment. Its rodent control ability far outweighs the damage done to livestock. As a matter of fact, much of the domestic stock killing attributed to coyotes is actually done by feral dogs.

The good news is that the coyotes, because of their ability and cunning, have thus far been able to sustain human-inflicted losses. Hopefully, the value of the coyote will become better known and its persecution will end.

This nature note is dedicated to the memory of Michael Powell.

*By Zach Perron & Michael Powell
Edited by Kathleen Jones
Illustrated by Virginia Kolence*



Coyotes are dog-like in appearance. They have a sandy brown coat and a bushy tail.