



Wildlife Notes

Coyote (*Canis latrans*)

Adaptive and Opportunistic

In the early 1900s, coyotes were found only across the Great Plains, but during the last century humans have changed the environment. As urban and agricultural developments have increased and natural predators been eliminated, the coyote has adapted. Today, coyotes can be found in almost every urban, rural and wild habitat in North America.

Description

Coyotes are one of the most vocal North American canids, having a wide vocabulary of yips, barks and howls.

Often confused with wolves, coyotes can be distinguished by their smaller size, more elongated muzzle and more pointed and prominent ears.

The light-colored, thick fur of a coyote can mask its more delicate bone structure and sometimes give it an appearance of being larger than it actually is.

Adults weigh 20–40 pounds, and males are slightly heavier than females. Overall body lengths vary between 48–60 inches, and tails measure approximately 16 inches.

Diet

Coyotes are opportunistic. Readily eating carrion, fruit, seeds, berries or insects, they also will prey on a variety of mammals. Favoring rabbits, voles and mice, coyotes will prey on deer, but usually only first-year fawns or an occasional feeble or infirm adult. Coyotes can be livestock predators and may target domestic pets, such as cats and dogs in urban locales.

Territory and Marking

Coyotes are social, living in packs of 3–8 members. Each pack maintains a territory that can be relatively small, 2–3 square miles, but may span up to 40–50 square miles. Regardless of the size of the territory, each pack maintains an intensely guarded core zone where members predominantly reside.

Marking territory with a scent from fecal or urine deposits and anal-sac secretions, coyotes communicate with one another, other packs and with their predator neighbors. Scent marking helps avoid confrontations over resources and maintains pack integrity.

Coyotes have two anal musk glands, one on each side of the sphincter, that secrete a strong smelling, pasty liquid to personally identify individuals and packs.





Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are found throughout New Mexico. Photo by Dan Williams.

Family Life

One mated and monogamous pair forms the nucleus of each pack of 3–8 coyotes. Also known as the alpha pair, this dominant pair are the only animals in the pack that breed. Mating occurs in early February.

Following a gestation period of 60–63 days, pups are born to the dominant couple from late April to early May. The female gives birth in a den, usually modified or enlarged by the adults from existing natural shelter, such as a hollow log or abandoned burrow. Coyote pups are born blind and helpless and cannot open their eyes for about 10 days. The pups emerge from the den in 2–3 weeks after birth.

Usually, each pack has two or more young adults to protect their territory and help the nursing mother. Most often, these are siblings from the previous year who did not leave the pack when adulthood was reached. Young coyotes will also disperse, meet other wandering coyotes and eventually form new packs.

While the alpha female cares for the new pups, other members of the pack may care for the mother—bringing her food, babysitting and even helping move pups to another den.

A pack's core area frequently contains several den sites. Pups may be moved several times a week to lessen parasites that often infest dens and to avoid discovery by potential enemies.

Before pups are weaned at 5–7 weeks, mother and father coyotes give them partially digested solid food by regurgitating. Before long, the pups accompany their parents and older siblings on hunting excursions.

Fewer than half of all coyote pups live to see their first birthday. For those who do, the pack undergoes a social reorganization and internal shuffle in fall. Some of the pups disperse to become nomads, while others remain and become helpers for the following spring.

Nonprotected

Coyotes are abundant in many parts of New Mexico — a result of their high intelligence and amazing ability to adapt to a variety of habitats.

A nonprotected furbearer, coyotes may be legally hunted and trapped without restrictions by residents year-round. Nonresidents must purchase a license.



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