

Urban and Suburban Coyotes

The Urban Coyote

Historically, coyotes were most commonly found on the Great Plains of North America. Their range now extends from Central America to the Arctic. Except for Hawaii, coyotes live in all of the United States, Canada, and Mexico. In spite of being hunted and trapped for more than 200 years, more coyotes exist today than when the U.S. Constitution was signed.

Hardly any animal in America is more adaptable to changing conditions than the coyote. Coyotes can live just about anywhere. They are found in deserts, swamps, tundra, grasslands, brush, and dense forests, from below sea level to high mountains. They have also learned to live in suburbs and cities like Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix, and Denver.

One of the keys to the coyote's success is its diet. A true scavenger, the coyote will eat just about anything. Identified as a killer of sheep, poultry and deer, the coyote will also eat snakes and foxes, doughnuts and sandwiches, rodents and rabbits, fruits and vegetables, birds, frogs, grass and grasshoppers, pet cats and cat food, pet dogs and dog food, carrion, and just plain garbage.

Coyotes are active mainly during the nighttime, but they can be moving at any time during the day. Most sightings of coyotes occur during the hours close to sunrise and sunset.

Adult coyotes weigh between 20 and 45 pounds. Females are generally smaller than males and western coyotes are generally smaller than eastern coyotes.

Coyotes look like small collie dogs. They have erect pointed ears, slender muzzle, and a bushy tail. Most coyotes are brownish gray in color with a light gray to cream-colored belly. However, a coyote's color varies and may be somewhat darker or lighter depending upon the geographic region and the time of year. Most coyotes have dark or black hairs over their back and tail.

A high reproductive rate and rapid growth of offspring aid in the coyote's success. Coyotes breed in February and March and pups are born about 60 days later. An average coyote litter contains four or five pups. Pups are born in dens. In urban environments, dens can be in storm drains, under storage sheds, in holes dug in vacant lots, parks, or golf courses, or any other dark, dry place.

Pups are cared for by both parents and can eat meat and move about well by the time they are a month old. Because food requirements increase dramatically during pup rearing, this is a period when conflicts between humans and urban coyotes are common. By 6 months of age, pups have permanent teeth and are nearly fully grown. About this time, mother coyotes train their offspring to search for food so it is not unusual to observe a family group traveling through parks and golf courses. If food is deliberately or inadvertently provided by people, the youngsters quickly learn not to fear humans and will develop a dependency on easy food sources.

After this training period, usually in October and November, most young disperse and find their own breeding territory, but one or two pups may stay with the parents and become part of the family group. Although coyotes tend to travel and hunt singly or in pairs, they may form groups as population densities increase or where food is abundant such as in urbanized areas.



In areas where they are hunted or trapped, coyotes are extremely wary of human beings. However, in urban areas where they are less likely to be harmed and more likely to associate people with an easy and dependable source for food, they can become very bold. They will come up to the door of a house if food is regularly present. Coyotes have learned that small dogs and cats are easy prey. Newspapers across the country have carried stories of coyotes harassing leashed dogs on walks with their owners in and near parks and golf courses within city limits.

Calls to Wildlife Services (WS), a part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, for help or information involving urban coyotes often pertain to the animals attacking pets, eating garbage, or simply coming uncomfortably close to houses or people on foot.

If you enjoy seeing coyotes and want a closer look at them, use binoculars. Don't ever put food out to lure them closer. Nearly all wild animal bites occur when people attempt to feed them or to treat them like domestic animals. Enjoy watching wild animals, but don't lead them into temptation. Animals that lose their natural fear of humans are more likely to pose a danger to humans and the lifespan of such an animal is shortened. Remember, all wild animals are unpredictable and caution is the watchword when they are around.

Here are some steps you can take to reduce the chance of human-coyote conflicts:

- Do not feed coyotes!
- Eliminate sources of water, particularly in dry climates.
- Bird feeders should be positioned so that coyotes can't get the feed. Coyotes are attracted by bread, table scraps, and even seed. They may also be attracted by birds and rodents that come to the feeders.
- Do not discard edible garbage where coyotes can get to it.
- Secure garbage containers and eliminate garbage odors.
- Feed pets indoors whenever possible. Pick up any leftovers if feeding outdoors. Store pet and livestock feed where it is inaccessible to wildlife.
- Trim and clean, near ground level, any shrubbery that provides hiding cover for coyotes or prey.
- Fencing your yard could deter coyotes. The fence should be at least 6 feet high with the bottom extending at least 6 inches below ground level for best results.
- Don't leave small children unattended outside if coyotes have been frequenting the area.
- Don't allow pets to run free. Keep them safely confined and provide secure nighttime housing for them. Walk your dog on a leash and accompany your pet outside, especially at night. Provide secure shelters for poultry, rabbits, and other vulnerable animals.
- Discourage coyotes from frequenting your area. If you start seeing coyotes around your home or property, chase them away by shouting, making loud noises or throwing rocks.

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These steps may decrease the frequency of coyote sightings in your area if practiced continuously. However, coyotes are adaptable to change and are quick to learn new ways of survival. Occasional sightings most likely will continue. By making life for coyotes in your neighborhood more difficult, you will increase the likelihood that they will go somewhere else.

Suburban/Semi-rural

"Hobby farms" and "ranchettes" are more common today than ever before. Many Americans are enjoying a return to the rural lifestyle, living on a few acres and keeping poultry, horses, and other livestock. Many of these new "farmers" and "ranchers" are shocked to discover that coyotes kill and eat pets, poultry, and stock.

WS suggests (and offers technical assistance for) the following nonlethal methods to reduce damage done by coyotes:

- Use net-wire or electric fencing to keep coyotes away from livestock.
- Shorten the length of calving or lambing seasons.
- Confine livestock in a coyote-proof corral at night when coyotes are most likely to attack livestock.
- Use lights above corrals.
- Remove dead livestock so coyotes won't be attracted to scavenge.
- Remove habitats that provide homes to natural prey of coyotes, like rabbits, from lambing and calving areas.
- Use strobe lights and sirens to scare coyotes away.
- Use guard animals, such as dogs, donkeys, and llamas, to protect livestock.

Additional Information

For more information about this and other WS programs or to find out how to request assistance from your WS State office, contact the WS Operational Support Staff at (301)734-7921, or visit our Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov/ws.

Also, information on coyote research is available from the National Wildlife Research Center's Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov/ws/nwrc.

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