

The coyote - musician of the hills 3-1-16 – Dave deCalesta

The scientific name for the coyote is *Canis latrans* meaning “barking dog” which is an apt description—go outside your home after dark and listen and you will likely hear them barking, howling, and yipping in the hills above Keuka Lake.

At about 30 inches tall and averaging 25-30 pounds, the coyote is intermediate in size between the wolf and the fox. Coyotes look like a small German shepherd with a narrower snout and bushy tail and come in brindle combinations of gray, tan, black, and brown. Coyotes, wolves, and foxes are predators and their diets overlap. So much so that they are competitors and do not tolerate each other. The bigger wolves attack and kill coyotes—where there are wolves there are few coyotes. Where there are coyotes, there are fewer foxes. Where there are no coyotes, wolves and foxes get along fine—their dietary overlap is small so they do not compete for the same food sources.



The common visualization of the coyote (aside from that of Wiley E. Coyote being frustrated by the roadrunner-beep!beep!) is with its head upturned and howling at the moon, which is rising over the horizon and partially obscured by a cactus—the coyote is thought of as a creature of the plains. In reality, it thrives in all kinds of environments, including prairies of the Midwest, forests of the far west, cities, such as Los Angeles and New York City (think Central Park) and forest-farmland mixes in the East, including New York and the Finger Lakes region. Coyotes migrated east from the plains states with the extinction of wolves and increasing agricultural development of the former tall grass prairies of the Midwest. By 1920 the coyote had reached New York State and in the absence of wolves rapidly colonized all regions.

Coyotes have litters of 4-6 pups in March and generally hunt in family groups, sometimes using tag-team tactics to run down deer. Coyotes are cautious and well-camouflaged—you almost never see them in the fields and woods but rather hear them at night or occasionally see the unlucky road-kill.

Coyotes eat anything and everything, including rodents, ground-nesting birds, roadkill, deer fawns, sometimes adult deer, lambs, calves, and crops such as watermelons, corn and squashes, and cats and small dogs. It is their cosmopolitan diet that gets them in trouble with us—farmers are upset when their lambs and calves are killed by coyotes, and pet owners are horrified when the cat or small dog turns up missing, or worse, their mangled remains are found after a night out.

Where livestock losses occur, coyote control is attempted, especially out west. But, living up to its name (Wiley) coyotes soon learn what a person with a gun means and avoid visual contact with humans. Local “coyote hunts” by hunters rarely kill enough coyotes to make a difference. Government trappers used to trap or poison coyotes, but the government programs no longer exist, the poisons are illegal, and most people do not possess the skills to trap coyotes. The best answer to coyote predation is to keep small pets in at night and lambs and calves in the barn at night until they are too big for coyotes to attack. Some people employ guard dogs, breeds specifically developed to live with cattle and sheep and attack coyotes.

Coyotes do not attack humans, not even children, so howling coyotes should not instill fear in parents. Rather, count yourself lucky if you hear them chorusing at night or you catch a glimpse as they dash across the road or are spied in the far reaches of a crop field. And, be thankful for their contributions - they do help keep pest rodents under control, help keep local deer populations in check, and remind us at night that forever wild still exists in the hills and forests around Keuka Lake.