

Coyote

Canis latrans

The coyote is named from the Aztec word, coyotl, which means “barking dog,” and it’s a familiar figure as the trickster in many Indian stories. Of all wild canine species in North America, the coyote is the most extensively studied and widest ranging. This extensive research has provided many interesting facts about a predator that is arguably the hardest and most adaptable species in North America.

History and Status

Originally, the coyote inhabited most of the American West, with most of its range in the western plains states. Evidence suggests, however, that the coyote’s range included northern territories of Alaska and Canada. It also has been found in Mexico and as far south as Costa Rica. The coyote began to appear east of the Mississippi as early as the 1930s.

Despite extensive control attempts (especially in Western states), coyotes have survived and expanded their range. Americans have devoted more efforts to control coyotes than any other North American species. In 1971 alone, the United States government spent about \$8 million for coyote control. But although it has preyed on livestock, it is ecologically valuable as a predator of rodents.

Description

In describing the coyote, care must be taken in making generalizations. There are 19 subspecies in the species (*Canis latrans*). For the most part, a coyote is a smaller version of a gray wolf with

larger ears and a smaller, more narrow snout. Coloration, depending on locale, can range from reddish to dark gray. Its size is also variable. A coyote averages about 2 feet tall at the shoulder and 4 feet in length. The eastern subspecies of coyote is normally larger than its western counterpart. This is attributed to its crossbreeding with the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) in the northeastern part of its range. Adults are about the size of a medium-sized dog and weigh between 20 and 35 pounds. Coyotes may be mistaken for dogs, and the existence of fertile dog-coyote hybrids adds more confusion to the identification program.

The coyote has five toes on both front feet and four toes on its hind feet. Its feet are smaller than the average dog’s of the same body size. A coyote has 42 teeth that are used for tearing rather than chewing. It swallows the torn piece of meat whole. The skull structure is a common way of distinguishing coyotes from other canine species including feral (gone to the wild) dogs.

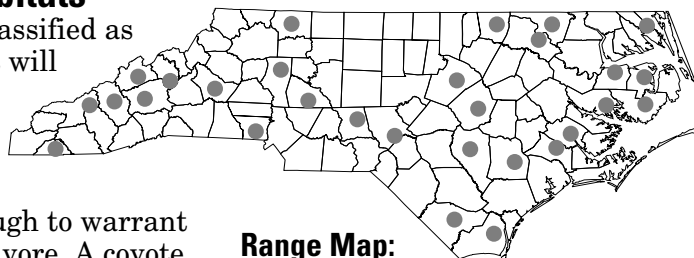
Habits and Habitats

The coyote is classified as a carnivore, but it will eat vegetation occasionally. The occasional consumption of plant matter is not enough to warrant the status of omnivore. A coyote relies on a wide variety of prey

species. Like many carnivores, the coyote’s diet varies with seasonal changes. In the summer it will eat most types of small mammals: mice, rabbits, fawns, flying squirrels, woodchucks, insects and the occasional bird. In the fall the diet is much the same; however, a coyote living around farmland will eat corn, apples and watermelons if they are abundant. The coyote’s diet in the winter consists mainly of mice and rabbits. In the spring the diet shifts back to its typical summer food.

The pups are on a diet consisting of milk and regurgitated meat by June, and the pups are learning to hunt at eight or nine weeks of age. The family unit usually begins to disperse by late November or December. In many cases one pup stays behind as a “helper” pup for the next year’s litter.

In describing the coyote’s habitat it can be said that a coyote will survive anywhere its prey can survive. Its habitat is that variable.



Range Map:
Locations ●

Range and Distribution

At the time of European settlement, coyotes were found only in the Great Plains and Western areas, but their range has expanded eastward in recent decades. The coyote probably migrated to the northeastern United States naturally, and although experts say that it probably would have migrated into the Southeast on its own, the pace was accelerated through illegal releases. In North Carolina, for example, coyotes were introduced primarily by fox hunters.

Its range in North Carolina is hard to determine and is limited at best. Coyotes are presently considered a non-native species, with no harvest restriction or special protection. Confirmed specimens have primarily come from a relatively widespread portion of the coastal region. These populations are expected to increase with reproduction, immigration and additional illegal releases.

A coyote's territory is usually 2 to 3 square miles. These territories frequently overlap with a transient coyote that is searching for a mate or its own territory. This makes population estimation difficult, which in turn makes control difficult.

People Interactions

Much of the attention the coyote gets is from its tendency to prey on livestock. This is the reason that predator-control efforts, primarily in the West, eradicated large numbers of coyotes. Another reason for extensive control measures has been the coyote's appetite for deer. In one study it was found that coyote predation was responsible for half of the white-tail deer fawn mortality occurring in the first month of the fawn's life. Despite tremendous efforts to control coyotes, the animal is thriving today well outside its original range.



References

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Credits

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COYOTE

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Length: 3-4 ft.
Height: 2 ft. at shoulder
Weight: 20-44 lbs., with females a few pounds less

Food

Small mammals such as rabbits, rodents, birds, woodchucks, as well as birds, insects and the occasional deer. Commonly eats fruits such as plums, persimmons, watermelons and grapes.

Mating

Coyotes generally mate for life. Mating occurs Jan. to March. Gestation period is 60 to 63 days.

Young

Called pups. Litter size is 6-8. Blind at birth. Weaned at 5 to 7 weeks. Fed by both parents and by helpers. Emerge from den at 3 weeks. Learn to hunt at 8 or 9 weeks.