

The coyote is here to stay



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The morning broke clear and cold, as they often do during December in the plains. I was on a whitetail deer hunt in Kansas wondering why I had answered the horn of a hunter instead of becoming a golfer in some southern state. The temperature was in the single digits, and taking into account a steady north wind, the wind chill registered near unbelievable.

I have been told that deer like extreme cold weather but could not come up with a reason why other than to enjoy watching hunters shiver in the cold. As I stared out into the woods from my makeshift ground blind, a visitor came into view. He



This is the coyote that paid Mark Rackay a visit that cold morning on the plains. (Mark Rackay/Special to the

In 1931, congress passed a bill giving 10 million bucks to start what turned out to be the most campaign of persecution against any animal in North American history. The money funded an agency to work with poisons like strychnine to wipe the coyotes out.

During a nine-year period ending in 1956, the agency poisoned an estimated 6.5 million coyotes. The coyote is a survivor, simply because of its ability to adapt. When coyotes are persecuted, they tend to abandon the packing idea and scatter out across the landscape in singles.

People's attitudes changed somewhat to these animals when Disney produced a half dozen pro-coyote movies in the 1960s. I also believe that the old Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote cartoons had a little bit to do with it. President Nixon issued a presidential proclamation that banned the use of poisons on the public lands of the West.

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I have been told that deer like extreme cold weather but could not come up with a reason why other than to enjoy watching hunters shiver in the cold. As I stared out into the woods from my makeshift ground blind, a visitor came into view. He approached me cautiously, probably wondering who was stupid enough to be out in the cold.

He came dangerously close, but I remained very still, not moving at all, which was not difficult because I was frozen stiff. When he got to 3 feet in front of me, I got nervous and blurted out a word at him that I probably did not learn in Sunday school. He only backed off a few feet, and then approached again, but this time I was ready for him. When he got near my face I snapped a picture of him.

My morning visitor was the coyote shown in the picture with this article. His winter fur was full and thick, as was his interest in the stupid human hiding in the brush on that cold December morning. We exchanged a few pleasantries and he was on his way.

In 1804, Lewis and Clark were paddling along the Missouri River, in what is now known as South Dakota. In September of that year, they encountered what was first believed to be a fox, but soon determined it must be some type of wolf. They collected one of the creatures and called it a prairie wolf. What they discovered had called this country home for a long time, long before this expedition ever entered the arena.

The coyote comes from the canidae family, which evolved in North America some 5.3 million years ago. As other species of



This is the coyote that paid Mark Rackay a visit that cold winter morning on the plains. (Mark Rackay/Special to the Montrose Daily Press)

canidae, like jackals and wolves spread around the world via land bridges connecting America to Europe and Asia, the coyote stayed here evolving into his own species around a million years ago.

Coyotes have narrow and elongated snouts, giving them a great sense of smell to go along with superb eyesight and hearing. Most have lean bodies, yellow eyes, thick fur (especially in winter), and a long bushy tail.

These critters weigh in anywhere from 20 to 50 pounds and average 3 feet in length from head to rump. Their tail adds another 16 inches to their overall length. Their fur color can be gray, white, tan or brown, all with a little black mixed in. On several occasions, I have seen reddish colored coyotes. The coyote is known for its howling at night, usually to communicate its location to others. Coyotes use three distinct calls: a squeak, a distress call that is more of a bawl, and a howl, earning them the nickname "song dogs."

Song dogs are not picky eaters. They eat everything from rodents, fish, rabbits, livestock, pets and deer. Their diet is 90% mammalian. They will also eat snakes, fruits, insects and grass. The coyotes that live in the big cities live on pet food or garbage.

Generally coyotes are

solitary creatures and mark their territory with urine. They are a packing animal, and will form a pack when hunting. They take turns pursuing the larger animal, like a deer, until it tires. They also may drive their prey toward a hidden member of the pack. These natural hunters are nocturnal for the most part, which is why people usually only hear them howling at night.

Breeding season is February and March when the females begin building dens. Females have a gestation period of 63 days and give birth to groups of three to 12 pups. By fall, the pups usually hunt for themselves and start breeding by the time they are 22 months old. In the wild, coyotes can live 10 years.

Males become more aggressive during the mating season. They are more likely to show no fear and approach when at other times you may never even see them. People should exercise caution, especially during the breeding times because males seem to lose their fear of humans at times.

The coyote has survived many attempts of extermination by man. The Bureau of Biological Survey had pretty much destroyed the wolf population by the 1920s and declared the coyote as the new arch predator of the time, in order to protect the livestock industry.

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Today, some 500,000 coyotes are killed each year, with many shot from helicopters. Ask any sheep or cattle rancher and you will learn how they lose many calves and lambs each year to them. Folks with chickens and pets are also at risk, as these animals are not friends of the farmer.

Through it all, the coyote has not only survived, but also thrived. Coyotes now reside in 49 states and spread from their original territory west of the Rockies to the East Coast. The coyote has even found refuge in large cities like Chicago and New York.

The coyote is very much a part of our outdoor history. I am torn between hate for the animal and what he does to pets, livestock and deer, and the big part he plays in my outdoor experience. I have sat around some campfires, listening to the coyotes howl away under the vast stars of the universe, and decided that whether you love him or hate him, he is here to stay.

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