

The Humane Society of the United States

Coyote



Coyotes are a close relative of the wolf and the domestic dog.

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Coyotes and Dogs

The popular name for the coyote comes from the Aztec word *coyotl*, which can be loosely translated as "trickster." Taxonomy classifies the coyote (*Canis latrans*) as a close relative of the wolf and the domestic dog. So close, in fact, that it is still a scientific detective story as to how much admixing has occurred between the groups.

All members of the genus *Canis* are capable of inter-breeding, and we know that coyotes, wolves, and dogs have exchanged genetic material in the past. The only question is, how much? In some places, such as the eastern United States, it may have been considerable. The relatively larger size of eastern coyotes is often

attributed to crossing with domestic dogs. There, the term "coydog" is often heard in reference to suspected crosses between coyotes and dogs.

Rural and Urban Habitat

Once restricted mostly to the open prairies of the central United States, northern Mexico, and southern Canada, coyotes have adapted to virtually all biomes—communities of plants and wildlife—in North America, thanks in large part to European settlement. The settlers did coyotes a big favor through the relentless pursuit of the animal's larger cousin, the wolf, whose presence often held coyote populations in check, and through the abundant provision of garbage, dead draft animals, and wantonly slaughtered wildlife, such as the bison, upon which coyote populations thrived. In fairly recent times, coyote populations have pushed eastward into places previously unknown to them. Some of the very last pockets of unoccupied space are falling even today, such as Washington, D.C. and even New York City.

Coyotes are one generalist species of wild animal that not only tolerates cities and towns, but actually thrives in them. Urban coyotes were noteworthy enough in the greater Los Angeles area to be singled out for study in the 1960s. Living in the natural strips of vegetation left in the canyons and ravines, these urban coyotes moved easily in and out of settled areas, traveling and foraging in some of the more densely settled places. Since then, coyotes have shown up in Chicago and New York and dozens of smaller cities, perfectly happy to build dens in out-of-the-way woodlots and to forage the abundant food sources that cities provide.

Coyotes are territorial, with the males marking their boundaries, as many canids do, with urine signposts. The size of the territory is directly related to the quality of the habitat, and often it takes several square miles to support a coyote family. Their dens may be an enlarged fox burrow, a rock ledge cave, or a shallow pit under a windblown tree.

Social Structure

As with wolves, there is an alpha female and an alpha male in each coyote group; generally, they are the only ones in the group to breed. The beta members help raise the pups. It's thought that coyotes mate for life, although not much is known about the phenomenon of pair bonding between male and female. Throughout most of their range, coyotes breed during February or March, and give birth in April or May. Litter size varies, depending in part upon environmental conditions as well as coyote population density. Gestation averages 63 days, with an average litter size of six pups in older females. One- and two-year-old females tend to have smaller first litters, averaging three pups.

The female nurses the pups for up to two months, but starts offering regurgitated meals as early as three weeks. This form of feeding is widespread among canids, and represents an economical way of weaning young from milk to semi-solid meals. It is also a convenient way to transport food for animals who do not have pockets. The pups mature quickly, and are fully independent at about nine months. The male coyote provides protection and food for the mother and offspring until the offspring are able to hunt for themselves.

Conflicts with Humans

Coyotes are opportunistic feeders who eat a wide variety of plants and animals. It might be easier to list the few things they do *not* eat than to account for everything they do. Coyotes almost certainly do humans more good than harm by keeping a natural balance between animals, such as rabbits and rodents, and landscapes, such as agricultural fields, that humans seek to protect.

All this good, however, immediately dissipates when the occasional cat or small dog becomes part of the coyote's eclectic palate. Where livestock is raised—sheep in particular—coyotes can, of course, be injurious, especially when flocks are left undefended. In

some cases, the hostility toward rural coyotes that characterizes the livestock-protection issue has been transferred to the urban coyote, who is seen as a threat to free-roaming pets.

Without question, there is no other wild animal in North America whom humans have tried so fervently to eradicate—and who have been so remarkably resistant. Coyotes have been pursued, brutalized, shot, poisoned, and trapped in untold numbers. Despite all this, coyotes have survived, expanding their range with a remarkable resistance.

For more information on coyotes and how to live peacefully with them, download our [coyote factsheet](#) [PDF].

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