

COYOTE BIOLOGY AND BEHAVIOUR



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General biology

The coyote found throughout much of Ontario, is a hybrid between the smaller western coyote and the eastern wolf. Adult females weigh an average of 13 to 16 kilograms (kg), while adult males usually range between 16 to 18 kg. The size and weight of coyotes are often over-estimated because of their thick coats and bushy tails.

In protected areas coyotes can live eight to 12 years, but in areas where they are hunted, or in populated areas like southern Ontario where vehicle collisions are common, the average life expectancy is less than five years.

The coyote's basic social unit is a mated pair, and coyote pairs will often mate for life. Coyotes are territorial and territories are generally exclusive of other breeding coyotes. Territory size can range from a few square kilometres where food is abundant to over a hundred where prey is very scarce.

The availability of food affects what coyotes eat, the size of their territory and populations, reproduction and survival rates. It also affects when pups leave their parents and how far they will travel to establish their own territories.

Life cycle

Mated pairs usually breed in February, with pups born in April or May. Litters average five or six pups, but can range from two to 10. Both parents share pup-rearing duties, and begin to teach the pups hunting skills when the pups are about eight to 10 weeks old.

Juveniles usually leave their parents' territory during their first autumn or winter to establish their own territory. "Packs" of coyotes are generally an adult breeding pair and their pups from the most recent litter.

Diet

Coyotes are opportunistic feeders and will consume a variety of foods, including meat, carrion (dead animals), fruits and vegetable matter. In winter, their diet consists mainly of rabbits, hares and deer when deep snow restricts the deer's mobility. In spring, summer and fall, coyotes prey mainly on small mammals (rodents, rabbits, mice and voles) and eat wild berries, birds, amphibians, grasshoppers, and deer fawns.

Because their diet consists mainly of small rodents, coyotes can be very beneficial in controlling pests that may cause damage to crops and orchards. However, livestock such as sheep, lambs and calves can also be prey to coyotes.

Habitat

Coyotes are highly adaptable. They are most commonly associated with open, agricultural landscapes interspersed with woodlots and other brushy terrain. However, they also inhabit green spaces and industrial areas within cities.

Populations

Coyote populations normally fluctuate in response to the abundance or scarcity of food. When food supplies are limited, they experience higher mortality rates and lower reproduction rates. Only 20 to 50 per cent of pups survive their first year. Humans account for most coyote deaths through hunting, trapping and motor-vehicle accidents.

Impact of Harvesting on Populations

Within each territory, one breeding pair of coyotes produces a single litter of pups each year. These breeding males and females tend to have relatively high survival rates because of their familiarity with their territory and their reduced tendency to "take risks".

Most harvested coyotes are juveniles that have left their parents' territories and are looking for their own territory and mate. Harvest by humans does little to disrupt breeding or reduce coyote numbers from one year to the next. Without a territory, most of the juvenile coyotes harvested would likely have died of other causes in a relatively short period of time anyway.

Behaviour

Since migrating to Ontario more than 100 years ago, the coyote has adapted well to both rural and urban environments. The eastern coyote is now an integral and permanent part of our diverse landscape, and performs an important role as a top predator in southern Ontario where most other large predators, such as bears and wolves, are no longer present.

Many people hear coyotes without ever seeing them because of their nighttime howls, barks, throat growls and yips. Coyotes howl to broadcast occupancy of their territory and keep members of the family group aware of each other's locations while hunting or traveling alone. Howling may also help coordinate some hunting activities.

Coyotes are usually wary of humans and avoid people whenever possible. They have adapted well to living near humans and development. In urban areas coyotes tend to be nocturnal. They typically roam at night looking for food and spend the daylight hours bedded in bushy or wooded areas. Although unusual, coyotes in urban areas may search for food during the day and may prey on small dogs and other pets from yards in residential areas and from green spaces.

It is unusual for coyotes to show no fear of humans. Coyotes displaying no fear of humans or exhibiting aggressive behaviours have likely been habituated to people through direct feeding or indirect feeding, such as leaving attractants like pet food outside near homes. In these situations, this aggressive behaviour tends to be restricted to a single animal or family group, and not the general population.

Landowner conflicts

Homeowners can take steps to avoid attracting coyotes to their property, keep their pets and livestock safe, and reduce the potential for coyote encounters. For more information on this, see [Coyotes in the Community](#).

Under the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Act, landowners are responsible for managing problem coyotes on their property. Those actions can include harassing, capturing and releasing the animal in close proximity to the capture site, or killing it. Landowners may also use agents authorized under the Act or by the ministry to undertake these measures on their behalf. [Anyone who kills a coyote in protection of property in Wildlife Management Units 1-42, 46-50 and 53-58 must immediately report](#) it to the [local ministry office](#). Landowners should also check with their municipality regarding firearm discharge bylaws in their area.

When dealing with coyote conflicts, history shows "bounties" or "culls" are not effective. Most coyotes removed under these programs are the easy-to-catch juveniles or transient animals passing through an area, not the breeding adults that are most often the problem. In addition, programs such as "bounties" don't target the specific animals causing the conflict or problem in specific areas, but rather indiscriminately target all coyotes across a broad region. Bounties – financial incentives to hunt and trap – have been illegal in Ontario since 1972.

Municipalities and counties may say "bounties" when they actually mean paying authorized agents, under an authorization from the Ministry of Natural Resources, to kill problem coyotes. This authorization has conditions on targeting specific problem coyotes such as those that are killing livestock. These authorizations are for relatively short periods and are confined to specific geographic areas where problem coyotes have been identified.

Research also demonstrates that relocating coyotes is not a solution. Coyotes are highly mobile and territorial animals. A relocated coyote usually ends up in a conflict with an older adult, as most areas are already occupied by a dominant pair. Coyotes can also travel hundreds of kilometres to return to their original capture location. As well, relocation increases the potential for spreading disease.

Diseases

Coyote diseases or parasites can be a risk to domestic dogs but rarely to humans. Rabies is rare in coyotes in Ontario. Coyotes may actually help to reduce the incidence of rabies in Ontario since they often prey on foxes, a species more likely to carry the disease.

Manqe is common in coyote populations in Ontario. Manqe is caused by a parasitic mite that burrows into the outer layer of the skin, resulting in extreme irritation. It can result in the death of the animal.

LEARN MORE

To learn more about coyotes, including how to deal with coyote problems, [call the Ministry of Natural Resources office that serves your area](#). If the coyote poses an immediate threat or danger to public safety, call 911.