

West Virginia
Wildlife
Series

*A Guide to Mammals of West
Virginia*

Coyote (Canis latrans)



Volume 3

Characteristics:

The coyote has grayish-brown to yellowish-brown fur on top and whitish fur on its under parts. It has large triangular ears on the top of its head and a long, narrow muzzle. It has a black nose, yellow eyes and a long, bushy tail. One way to tell the coyote apart from wolves and dogs is to watch its tail when it runs. The coyote runs with its tail down. Dogs run with their tails up and wolves run with their tails straight out. Males are usually larger than females by 5 - 15 pounds.

Range:

Coyotes are found in all parts of the United States, except for Hawaii. They are also found in Mexico, Central America and most of Canada. Their home range covers about 16 square miles, but may extend up to 100 square miles in poor areas.

Habitat:

Coyotes can be found in a variety of habitats including fields, plains and bushy areas.

Diet:

The coyote does most of its hunting alone and at night. It is carnivorous. Most of its diet is made up of mammals, but it also will eat birds and snakes. It prefers to eat fresh kill, but it will eat carrion. In the fall and winter, the coyote often eats fruits, vegetables and berries.

When hunting small prey like mice, the coyote will stand still with its legs stiff and then pounce on its prey. When hunting larger prey like deer, coyotes hunt in packs. One or more coyote will chase the deer while the others wait, then the next group will pick up the chase. Working in teams like this, the coyote can tire the

deer out, making it easier to kill. Coyotes also often follow badgers and catch prey that pop out of burrows the badger is digging.

Carnivores:

Carnivores are **predators**. They hunt and eat other animals to survive. Mammals that are carnivores have sharp teeth adapted for ripping meat from a carcass.

Carnivores like the wolf have large, powerful jaws that help bring down large animals like deer. The bobcat and cougar have powerful paws with sharp claws that help them catch prey.

Herbivores have teeth adapted to chewing plants. Their big molars are designed to help them grind up leaves, seeds and twigs.

Meat-eating birds like hawks and owls have keen eyesight that makes it easier for them to spot prey. They have sharp talons to catch prey and curved beaks to tear up meat. All of these adaptations help these carnivorous birds catch and eat their prey.

Carnivores have to work hard for their food. Most prey animals have good defense systems to help them avoid predators. Most warm-blooded predators like the coyote have to hunt frequently. Cold-blooded predators like snakes can go days or even months between meals.

Some carnivores, like the seal and the sea lion, spend a lot of time hunting in the water. Sea lions, walruses and seals are **pinnipeds**, which means, "fin feet." Pinnipeds



are adapted for hunting in the water. They have torpedo-like bodies that help them shoot through the water, flippers for legs, and some have ears and noses that close up when they are underwater. Pinnipeds eat fish, crabs and other marine animals.

The carnivore's niche in the community is to help control populations. Very young, old or sick prey, are most vulnerable to predators. Without predators, populations of animals like mice and deer would grow too large and sick animals might spread disease to other animals. By catching prey, carnivores help keep a balance in communities between producers and consumers.

Diseases common to Coyotes:

Coyotes are susceptible to many of the same ailments as domestic dogs.

Distemper - is one of the more common and serious diseases. Distemper is a contagious, incurable, often fatal, multisystemic viral disease that affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal, and central nervous systems. It is possible for humans to contract an asymptomatic (subclinical) CDV infection. Anyone who's been immunized against measles (a related virus) is protected against CDV as well.

Mange - Another common coyote disease, Mange is caused by a small mite, which burrows into the skin, causing an irritation. This disease is extremely contagious, affecting as much as 70% of the coyote population. Mange mites can infect humans, but the symptoms are usually mild, consisting of a rash near the infected area.

Heartworm - infection is a fairly common disease caused by parasitic worms living in the arteries of the lungs and heart of

coyotes. In rare instances humans have also contracted this serious and potentially fatal disease.

Rabies - is an acute, fatal encephalomyelitis caused by neurotropic viruses. It is almost always transmitted by an animal bite that inoculates the virus into wounds. Any coyote bite or scratch should receive prompt local treatment by thorough cleansing of the wound with copious amounts of soap and water; this local treatment will significantly reduce the risk of rabies. Anyone who may have been exposed to rabies should be advised to always contact local health authorities immediately for advice about post exposure prophylaxis and should also contact their personal physician as soon as possible.



Communication:

Coyotes use a variety of vocalizations to communicate among themselves:

Alarm call - A shrieking repetitive bark, warning to other coyotes of danger.

Distress call - Similar to an alarm call that an individual coyote needs help.

Greeting - A yip/howl happy vocalization that welcomes others back to the pack.

Location howl - A lone long howl where coyotes try to locate other members of the pack.

Territorial barks - Repetitive barks that act as a warning for others to keep out of their space.

Pack communications - A kind of yip/howl "talk" among members.

Summon puppies - Very high-pitched barks and whines.

Puppy feed-me sounds - High-pitched whimpers and whines.

Puppy distress sounds - Howls and cries.

Submissive sounds - Yelps and cries as if a member is being killed.

Dominance - Growls.

Pair bonding - Frenetic whining and whimpering.

Challenge - Multiple repetitive barks.

Other - Other combinations of barks, yips, shrieks, whines, whimpers and howls are thought to summon other coyotes, signal others of feeding opportunities, ask for information, and to announce a coming out among a bonding pair.

Life Cycle:

The coyote mates between February and April. The female may mate with more than one male. Two months after mating, the female gives birth to between one and nineteen pups. The average litter size is usually around six. The pups are born blind and with floppy ears. They open their eyes in about ten days. The pups begin to come out of their den when they are about three to four weeks old. They are weaned when they are about a month old. Once they are fully weaned, both parents feed the pups regurgitated food. Male pups will leave their mother when they are between six and nine months old. Female pups will stay with their mother's pack. Male and female coyote's pair off and mate together for several years.

Coyotes have been known to live a maximum of ten years in the wild and 18 years in captivity.

Behavior:

Coyotes make their dens in rocky crevices, logs, caves or the dens of other animals. They usually don't dig their own den. They will find an abandoned den of a badger or a fox and enlarge it.

The coyote is a very vocal animal. It has a number of vocalizations including barks, growls, yips, whines and howls. It uses a long howl to let other members of the pack know where it is. It uses short barks to warn of danger. When a pack of coyotes is welcoming a member into the pack the coyotes yip. Other vocalizations include growls when establishing dominance, whining and whimpering when males and females are establishing bonds and high-pitched barks to summon puppies.

Coyotes have amazing endurance. They can run over thirty miles an hour, trot up to twenty miles an hour, and maintain a steady trot for hours at a stretch.

Contrary to popular belief, coyotes are solitary. (The so-called "bands" of coyotes that are sometimes seen are almost always family groups composed of a mother and her young.) They are also nocturnal for the most part.

Identifying Coyote Scat:

Coyote scat is varied in color from black to brown, or a combination, growing lighter and more gray as the scat ages. Length 3 to more than 4 inches, cylindrical, segmented, about 1 inch in diameter. May be composed largely of blueberries when these are available, giving the scan a purplish color, but usually

covered with fur or hair wrapped around small bones of prey animals.

Coyote scat is extremely variable in size. The residue from pure meat is likely to be semi-fluid. The scat consisting of much hair is likely to be large. Those resulting from a diet of pine nuts or chokecherries are likely to crumble. In size, coyote scat overlap those of the wolf and the red fox, and those of pups are of course much smaller.

Scat is likely to be deposited along trails. In the eastern mountains they will be found where a trail comes over a little knoll, or level place, or any other point of special interest to the coyote. There is likely to be an accumulation where two trails cross - as when a ridge trail dips down a slope and crosses a trail coming over a saddle.

Such accumulations may be at the scent post used by dogs or foxes. This may be a rock, a prominent tuft of grass, a stump, or almost anything that stands out, where urine is deposited by members of the dog family who casually investigate it when passing by.

Coyote Tracks:



FRONT



HIND

Some dog tracks may be easily confused with coyote tracks even when the tracks are well defined. The shape of tracks, the length

of the stride, the prominence of nail marks and the pattern of travel are important. Coyote tracks tend to be more oval-shaped and compact than those of common dogs. Nail marks are less prominent and the tracks tend to follow a straight line more closely than those of dogs. Except for greyhounds and whippets, most dogs of the same weight as coyotes have a slightly shorter stride. The normal coyote track is about 2 inches wide and 2 1/2 inches long, with the hind track slightly smaller than the front. The average coyote's stride at a trot is 16 to 18 inches and the hind tracks tend to follow directly in line with or on top of front tracks.

Number of toes: 4 front - 4 rear

Front Foot: 2 5/8 in L x 2 1/8 in W

Rear Foot: 2 3/8 in L x 2 in W

Straddle:

Trail Width: 5

Slow Stride: 13 - 16 in

Running Stride: 16 - 50 in

Definitions:

Straddle - The distance between the insides of opposing feet.

Pitch - The distance a foot angles in or out in relation to the animals' line of travel.

Trail Width - The distance between the outermost prints in any one pattern.

Stride - The distance from the foremost toe of one print to the foremost toe of the next print.

Track Size - The length and width of a track. (Sometimes used to determine species.)



This series of Wildlife guides has been compiled and edited by Bill Church.

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