

# The Coyote

## Our Elusive Neighbor

*By Tom Adair, Natural Resource Manager*

Coyotes are widely distributed throughout most of the United States. Historical accounts prior to the 1900s indicate that they were mainly established west of the Mississippi River. Best estimates indicate the coyote made its initial appearance in Ohio in 1919. Today it is found in all of Ohio's 88 counties! Although most often associated with open territory, these widely adaptable creatures have shown that they will establish all habitat types – rural as well as urban. In fact, a biologist with The Ohio State University has been conducting research on thriving coyote populations in the city of Chicago.

The coyote's home range depends on the food and cover resources available and on the number of other coyotes in an area, but it generally averages between 8 and 12 square miles. Mated pairs and four to seven recently born pups occupy the home range during the spring and summer seasons in Ohio.

A member of the dog family, coyotes can be difficult to distinguish from a medium-sized German shepherd from a distance. There is a wide variation in the coyote's color, but generally its upper body is lighter gray, and the fur covering the throat and belly is white to cream color. The coyote's ears are pointed and stand erect, unlike the ears of domestic dogs that often droop. When observed running, coyotes carry their bushy, black-tipped tail below the level of their back. By comparison, wolves are larger than coyotes and carry their tail in a horizontal position while running. Adult weight is anywhere between 20 to 50 pounds and adults may be 1.5 to 2 feet tall and between 41 to 53 inches long on average.

People are most likely to see coyotes during their breeding period, which occurs in Ohio from mid-January into March with a gestation of approximately 63 days. As fall approaches, pups begin dispersing from the den site to establish home ranges of their own. Young dispersing animals sometimes establish new territories as far as 10 to 100 miles away from the family unit. Although coyotes have shown preference for nocturnal activity, they are active both day and night with peaks in activity occurring at sunrise and sunset.





Coyotes can often live three to ten years in the wild. Natural causes of mortality include disease, predation and starvation. However, hunting and trapping can also cause coyote mortality. Ohio has no "closed season" for hunting or trapping of coyotes and there is no bag limit, although a valid Ohio Hunting License is required to hunt or trap them. According to research by The Ohio State University, approximately 50 to 70% of juvenile coyotes do not reach adulthood. Annual adult mortality averages 30 to 50%. Coyotes can compensate for severe reductions in population numbers by breeding at younger ages and by having larger litters.

Coyotes are opportunistic and will eat almost anything available. Small mammals such as mice, voles, shrews, rabbits, hares and squirrels are preferred foods. However, insects, fruits, berries, birds, frogs, snakes, plants and seeds round out their diet. Seasonally, coyotes will change their diets to adapt to what is most available. In areas with high deer numbers, carrion resulting from vehicle-deer collisions, natural causes and crippling losses is an important source of food. In urban areas, coyotes are attracted to garbage, garden vegetables and pet food. They will also prey on unattended small dogs and cats if opportunities exist. Some coyotes learn to kill smaller livestock, such as sheep, goats, calves and poultry. Larger animals are almost always consumed as carrion.

Coyotes rarely attack humans. Bites from snakes, rodents, and domestic dogs are a far greater possibility than coyote bites, according to public health authorities. Coyotes that are fed become accustomed to people and present a human safety risk. People should never intentionally feed or attempt to tame coyotes. It is best for both coyotes and humans if coyotes retain their instinctive fear of people.

Local media and other sources of public information often cast coyotes in a poor and even scary light. While no animal can be considered as entirely safe, the coyote is generally shy and elusive, choosing to minimize contacts with humans. It is far more likely you would hear a coyote rather than see it. The characteristic howl of the coyote travels uniquely and often emanates from closer than it may sound. Given the movement of people into rural areas and the increase in residential development, however, there may be occasions when humans and coyotes will cross paths.

Coyotes have become a common wildlife species throughout Ohio and throughout Lake County. Park visitors will continue to have chance encounters and exciting viewing opportunities as the spaces between humans and coyotes continue to shrink. Knowing some basic coyote biology, using common sense and remembering the helpful points offered on this page can help to make these experiences safe and enjoyable for all. Listen for the howls!



## TIPS TO MINIMIZE COYOTE CONFLICTS:

- Never intentionally feed a coyote and try to minimize or eliminate all outside food sources, especially pet foods.
- Put garbage out the morning of pickup day.
- Be mindful of wood and brush piles; they are good habitat for rats and mice and may attract coyotes.
- Avoid the likelihood of a pet attack! Do not allow pets to roam free in areas where coyotes are known to have established and where they demonstrate a willingness to encounter people.

