LIVING with WILDLIFE

Coyotes

IDENTIFICATION

Coyotes look like small collie dogs. They have erect pointed ears, slender muzzle and a bushy tail. Most coyotes are brownish gray in color with a light gray to cream colored belly. However, color can vary from nearly black to nearly white. Most coyotes have dark or black hairs over their back and tail. Male coyotes weigh between 25 to 45 pounds. Female coyotes weigh 22 to 35 pounds.

HABITAT

Coyotes can live just about anywhere. They are found in deserts, swamps, tundra, grasslands, brush and dense forests, from below sea level to high mountains. They have also learned to live in suburbs and cities like Los Angeles, New York, Phoenix and Denver.
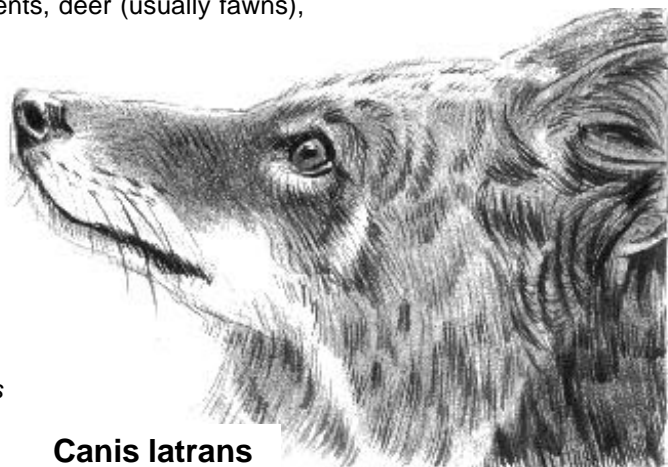
FOOD

Coyotes are **omnivores.** This means they eat both meat and plants. They eat rabbits, **carrion** (dead animals), rodents, deer (usually fawns), insects (such as grasshoppers), livestock and poultry. Coyotes eat fruit including berries and watermelons. They will also eat cats and dogs.

BEHAVIOR

Coyotes are most active at night and during early morning hours. Coyotes bed in sheltered areas but do not generally use dens except when rearing their young. Coyotes have good eyesight, hearing and a keen sense of smell.

Coyotes usually breed in February and March and have their pups in April and May. Average litter size is 5 to 7 pups. Both male and female coyotes hunt and bring food to their young. Other adults associated with the denning pair may help with hunting and caring for the young. Pups are usually weaned by six weeks of age but will remain with their parents until late summer or fall.

Historically, coyotes were most commonly found on the Great Plains of North America. Their range now extends from Central America to the Arctic. Except for Hawaii, coyotes live in all of the United States, Canada and Mexico.
ACTIVITY: On the map above, label the countries where coyotes live.

coyote track shown actual size - 3

ACTIVITY: If you have a dog, compare the size of your dog's paw to that of a coyote. How much does your dog weigh? How does this compare to the average weight of a coyote?

Canis latrans

In spite of being hunted and trapped for over 200 years, there are more coyotes today than when the United States Constitution was signed.

Living in Harmony, Living in Conflict

Living in harmony . . .
Most of the time, coyotes and humans live in harmony.

- *People enjoy watching and hearing these clever animals.*
- *Coyotes eat rabbits, rodents and other animals that conflict with people.*
- *Coyotes are **scavengers**. They help keep areas free from dead animals.*
- *Coyotes are part of the food supply for animals like wolves and mountain lions.*

People can help keep coyotes from becoming a problem if they:

- *Do not feed coyotes.*
- *Pick up and securely dispose of trash.*
- *Keep pets inside at night.*
- *Don't leave pet food and water outside at night.*

Living in conflict . . .
Conflicts can arise between coyotes and humans.

- *Coyotes kill livestock like sheep or calves.*
- *Coyotes kill cats and dogs.*
- *Coyotes sometimes carry rabies or other diseases.*
- *Coyotes sometimes will kill endangered or threatened animals that people are working to protect.*
- *Coyotes may hunt the same game mammals and birds that people hunt.*
- *Coyotes may be a hazard to aircraft.*

Preventing Damage Done by Coyotes

Many methods are used to prevent damage caused by coyotes. Some methods are **lethal** and result in the death of the coyote. Some methods are **nonlethal** which do not result in the death of the animal. Often, many methods are used. This is called integrated pest management or **IPM**. The purpose of IPM is to stop or reduce damage rather than eliminate the coyotes.

Some examples of damage done by coyotes include:

- killing of **lambs** and calves
- killing of cats and dogs
- eating watermelons and other fruit
- chewing drip irrigation systems

- killing endangered animals like the black-footed ferret, San Joaquin Kit Fox and California Least Tern.

Some examples of nonlethal ways to reduce damage done by coyotes to livestock include:

- using net-wire or electric fencing to keep coyotes away from livestock
- shortening the length of calving or lambing seasons
- confining livestock in a coyote proof corral at night when coyotes are most likely to attack livestock
- using lights above corrals
- removing dead livestock so coyotes won't be attracted to scavenge

- removing habitat that provides homes to natural prey of coyotes, like rabbits, from lambing and calving area
- using strobe lights and sirens to scare coyotes away
- using guard animals like dogs, donkeys and llamas to protect livestock.

Some lethal methods include:

- regulating sport hunting and trapping of coyotes to keep coyote populations in balance
- working with the USDA Wildlife Services to remove problem coyotes by selective hunting and trapping.

Distemper and canine hepatitis are the most common diseases occurring in coyotes. Rabies and tularemia also occur and may be transmitted to humans and other animals. Coyotes often carry parasites which include mites, ticks, fleas, worms and flukes.

Economics of Damage

Value of livestock killed by coyotes:

- lamb and sheep: $14,534,000   _____ %
- cattle and calves: $21,800,000   _____ %
- goats: $ 1,605,000   _____ %

MATH ACTIVITY:
What is the total value of the above animals lost to coyotes?

Source: 95/96 USDA Agricultural Stastitics
Figure the percentage of losses of each group of livestock to the total for livestock lost to coyotes. Write the percentage on the line beside the value of the loss.

Legends and Folklore

There is much **folklore** about the coyote. From the Aztec and Mayan civilizations of Mexico to almost all Native American peoples living west of the Mississippi River, legends about coyotes are plentiful. These cultures believed the coyote had magical powers.

The coyote is also known as Medicine Dog, Brother, Old Man Coyote and Little Wolf. The cunning nature of this animal earned it a place as the trickster in many Native American folk stories.

In Indian folklore, the coyote brought gifts to the people. According to Zuni legend, the coyote taught man to hunt. The Sioux believe it taught humans about useful plants. Indians of the Pacific Northwest tell how the coyote put salmon in the rivers and taught men how to make fish traps and salmon spears. The Sen people say the coyote taught them to take the sweet juice out of cactus.

When the world was first created, the buffalo had such keen eyesight that hunters could not come close without the buffalo running away. The coyote is said to have taken pity on the hunters. The coyote kicked sand in the buffaloes' eyes to make them nearsighted, a condition that remains to this day. The tales were meant to amuse as well as to teach moral lessons.

Because the coyotes were such an integral part of life in the American West, several proverbs from that region deal with coyotes. When one said, "The coyote won't get another chicken from me," it meant that one had learned a valuable lesson. To have "heard the coyote bark" meant that one had extensive experience.

Your turn . . .

Coyotes that live near cities and towns sometimes kill dogs and cats. Coyotes help control populations of dogs and cats that are feral (domestic animals that have become wild). People get upset when dogs and cats killed by coyotes are pets.

There is a coyote family living in your neighborhood. What do you suggest be done to keep coyotes from killing neighborhood pets?

Establishing a value....
Talk to your friends. Find out how many have pets. Make a list of these pets. Now ask them
"What is the value of each pet?"
"How much did the pet cost?"
"How much has their family spent caring for their pet?"
"If their pet was killed by a coyote, what would their loss be?"
Was it easy or hard to determine a value of pets?

Crossword: ACROSS: 2. omnivores, 4. Canis latrans, 9. lethal, 11. folklore, 12. ipm, 13. carrion
DOWN: 1. lambs, 3. scavenger, 5. nonlethal, 6. feral, 7. howl, 10. habitat
Math Activity: total $37,939,000; lambs and sheep 38%, cattle 57%, goats 4%
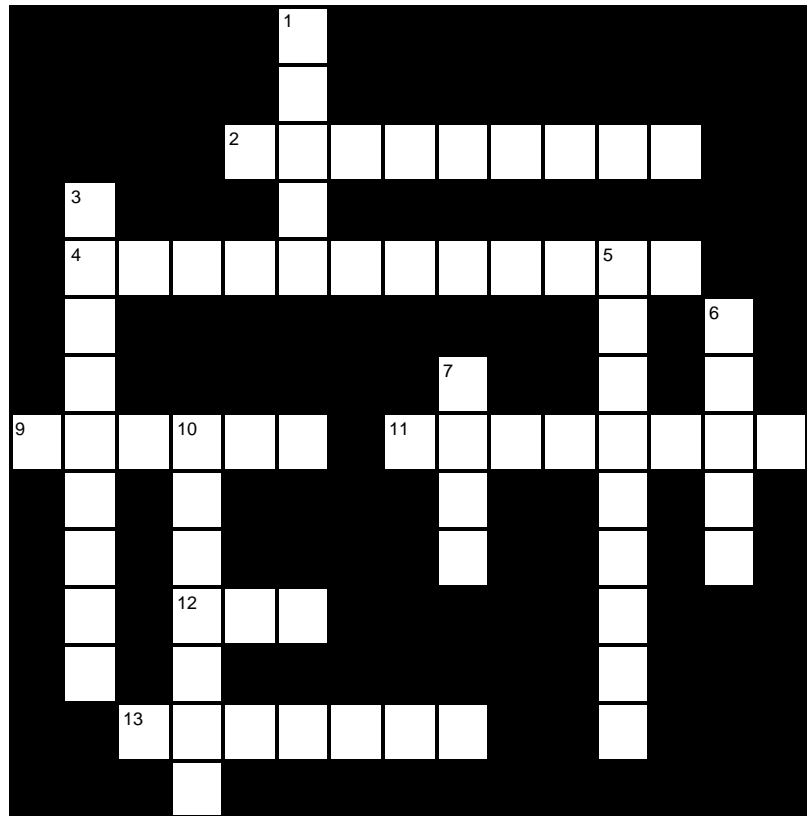
CROSSWORD REVIEW

ACROSS

2. animals that eat both plants and animals
4. scientific name for coyotes
9. resulting in death
11. traditional beliefs, legends or customs
12. integrated pest management
13. dead animal

DOWN

1. young sheep
3. an animal or organism that eats dead organic matter
5. not resulting in death
6. domesticated animal that has gone wild
7. sound made by coyotes
10. the natural home of a plant or animal

Canis latrans is the scientific name for coyote and means barking dog. The unique barks, yips and **howls** make a few coyotes sound like a large number of coyotes. The complex series of yips, howls and barks provide a communication system for the group.

Additional Resources