Coyote

Scientific Name: *Canis latrans*

The coyote is generally a slender animal, very similar in appearance to a medium-sized dog. Since the coyote and domesticated dog are from the same family, Canidae, the resemblance is more than a coincidence. Coyotes have a bushy tail which is usually tipped in black and is carried down at a 45 degree angle as the animal moves, unlike that of its other cousin the wolf. The majority of coyotes are grey, though some show a rusty, brown or off-white coloration. The coyote stands about one and one half to two feet tall and is between 41 to 53 inches in length. Males of this species are larger than the females and weigh anywhere from 20 to 50 pounds.

**Habitat and Habits**

The coyote is a nocturnal animal, active during the nighttime hours. However, when it is less threatened by man, it will hunt and move from place to place during the day. The coyote will hunt in unrelated (non-family) pairs or large groups, in search of small mammals including shrews, voles, and rabbits. The coyote will also eat fruits, grasses, vegetables, or carrion; it is an omnivore and adapts its diet to the available food source. Sheep predation normally occurs in the summer when additional food is needed by the adults feeding pups. Livestock carrion is used when available in the fall and winter months. Although the coyote has a notorious reputation for killing sheep and some other domesticated livestock, studies show that livestock makes up only 14 percent of the coyotes’ diet.

**Introduction**

Native American folklore is filled with tales of the coyote. This animal is either revered for its intelligence and ability to resolve a conflict or threat to its life or is frowned upon for being a cunning and deceiving manipulator, much as it is thought of in real life. The coyote is not native to Ohio, but it is present throughout the state today. Love or hate it, the coyote has the ability to make the best of a bad situation to survive or even prosper. Usually, we associate the coyote with the open, deserted lands of the west. As its presence in Ohio shows, this versatile animal can make a home most anywhere.

**Description**

Coyotes are currently found throughout the U.S., although prior to the 1900s they were generally located west of the Mississippi River. Only small pockets and sparse populations of coyotes were found east of the Mississippi at that time. The coyote made its initial appearance in Ohio in 1919 and today is found in all 88 counties. Historically, they have been associated with open territory, but have shown a preference in Ohio for making their homes in hilly farmland mixed with wooded areas. Coyotes have most often been found in the central portion of Ohio, ranging from Mercer County in the western half of the state to Harrison County near the eastern border. Ever adaptable, it is not unusual to find the coyote in a city setting. A pair was found in New York City in spring 1995!
Other coyotes are not the only animal to act as a hunting partner. The coyote has been observed following badgers as they dig and hunt for food. The coyote often takes the small prey the badger kicks up and doesn’t eat for itself. This apparently is an enduring practice, as pre-Columbian artifacts show the coyote and badger engaged in this hunting practice.

The coyote is no different than any other species of wildlife in that it needs shelter, food, and water to establish itself. The coyote’s strength is that it can adapt and exploit most any habitat to its advantage. While most wildlife species have avoided developed areas and often declined as a result of man’s expansion, the coyote seems to have thrived.

It’s not hard to see how an adaptable animal like the coyote could utilize urban areas to its advantage. Ample food can be found in dumpsters or garbage cans, and squirrels, rabbits, and raccoons are all fairly common in the city. Coyotes have been found taking shelter in drainpipes; abandoned buildings can also serve as a home. Most major cities were established near or along major waterways, thus a city dwelling coyote wouldn’t have to go far in search of water. Waterways and the adjacent land also provide travel lanes or corridors. Interestingly, the primary place where coyotes have been located in Ohio is in the vicinity of major watersheds. The coyote’s primary threat remains man; but by being active at night, it significantly reduces its contact with humans. So a city territory could provide as many opportunities and resources as the natural range of open farmland and woodlots.

Reproduction and Care of Young

Coyotes are monogamous, they pair for life with one mate. Breeding occurs sometime between January and March. The pregnant female carries her young a little over two months, and anywhere between 1 and 12 pups are born in April or May. The pups are born helpless—they are blind and unable to fend for themselves for the first few weeks of their lives, much like domesticated puppies. The female selects, prepares, and maintains the den. Occasionally, two or three females will share a large den area. Related females will sometimes act as helpers in the care of offspring of other coyotes in the den.

Both parents hunt for food and feed the young. However, the male takes the lead role when the pups are newborns, obtaining enough food for both his mate and offspring. The parents will regurgitate their stomach contents for their offspring’s meals. At about three weeks of age, the young leave the den under the watch of their parents. At 8 to 12 weeks of age, the pups are taught hunting skills. The coyotes stay together in a family unit throughout the summer into mid-fall when the young will break from the family unit and develop territories of their own. It is not unusual for young female coyotes to remain in the family unit into the following year; young males that have either never left the unit or that attempt to rejoin it the following year are run off by the male.

Female coyotes are cited as being exceptional mothers. If her pups are threatened at their den location, the mother will seek out a new den and move the pups immediately. A coyote mother was observed moving her pups on three separate occasions when the dens became unsafe.

The coyote is capable of breeding and producing fertile offspring with a number of its cousins, including the domestic dog (the offspring of this type of mating is referred to as a “coydog”), wild dogs, and wolves. The mixed offspring of the coyote can present a good deal of confusion as to whether or not a real coyote has been sighted in an area. Positive identification can only be made by examination of the skull. Research has shown that in Ohio, 98 percent of the animals sighted, captured, or killed are indeed coyotes. Only a small portion (two percent) have been identified as a coyote-dog mix.
Management Plans
The Division of Wildlife does not manage for the establishment or expansion of the coyote in Ohio. Division personnel assist farmers and other landowners in identifying and controlling nuisance coyotes. Division staff also work to inform and educate the public about the coyote and its presence in the state. Research is ongoing on resident coyote populations. Biologists are studying the animals’ behavior, movements, and population in the state.

Viewing Opportunities
For all its ability to adapt and cope with the presence of man, the coyote remains an elusive, almost invisible resident. More likely than not, you will hear a coyote rather than see one. Its characteristic lonely howl can be deceiving. The way the sound of the howl carries, it can seem as if the cry is coming miles away from where the coyote is actually located. Who knows, that distant forlorn call may really be as close as your own backyard!

At a Glance
Mating: Monogamous (male and female pair for life)

Peak Breeding Activity: January through March

Gestation Period: Approximately 63 days

Litter Size: 1-12 pups

Young are Born: April and May and are helpless; begin leaving the den with parents at 3 weeks of age

Number of Litters per Year: 1

Adult Weight: 20-50 pounds

Adult Height: 1 1/2-2 feet tall

Adult Length: 41-53 inches

Life Expectancy: 3-10 years

Migration Patterns: Year-round resident; juveniles will break from the family unit and establish their own territory anywhere from 10 to 100 miles away.

Feeding Periods: Has shown a preference for nocturnal activity, but in a secure environment, will hunt during the daylight hours.

Typical Foods: Omnivorous (will eat what’s available); small mammals (voles, shrews, rabbits, mice), vegetables, nuts, and carrion. Unchecked, they will eat livestock, particularly sheep and chickens.

Native to Ohio: No

Active or Potential Nuisance Species: Yes