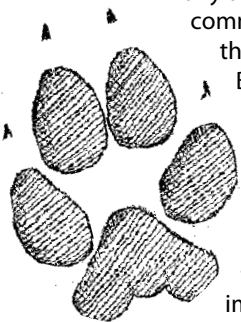




# Howl at the Moon

As dusk falls and the moon slowly rises, the day quiets itself down for the night. Then you hear it—the howl of a coyote breaks the silence, and then another returns the call. For many of us, the coyote's howl symbolizes the wild of nature and the freedom to roam. This somewhat haunting sound has both enchanted and frightened people for hundreds of years. The Native Americans who first heard coyotes made up myths and legends about them. In some of these stories coyotes gave humans gifts, while in other stories they were pranksters trying to cheat someone. Today people either view coyotes as evil creatures preying on other animals or value their role in keeping the number of rodents and rabbits under control.

Coyotes primarily resided in the Western United States until the late 1800s when settlers began cutting the Eastern forests. This caused the wolves to move out seeking areas that attracted larger prey. This, in turn, opened the door for coyotes to travel east to take over the previous predator's place. Nowadays coyotes can be found anywhere from forests to farms to suburbia and even the bustling streets of Chicago. Their adaptability is the key to their survival. Originally a prairie inhabitant, coyotes adapted as their habitat disappeared and they learned to live in many different areas. In this region coyotes are most common in conservation areas and forest preserves that offer a good mix of grasslands and open woods. But they also live in cemeteries and local parks.



While some people may be upset or even frightened by the presence of coyotes, it is possible for them to coexist with human populations. As long as a person doesn't threaten a coyote or its pups, coyotes will always be the first to flee in a coyote-human encounter. It is important, however, that people don't feed coyotes either deliberately or inadvertently, so these wild animals don't lose their fear of humans. In order to prevent coyotes from viewing humans as a food source, experts recommend securing garbage cans so coyotes don't become regular visitors; bring pet food and water dishes indoors; do not put meat scraps on compost piles; keep an eye on small dogs when outside and keep them on a leash and bring cats in at night.

Because coyotes are so adaptable, it is important for people to realize that they are not going away. Past efforts to eradicate

coyotes, whether by trapping, relocating, or killing only opens up territories and food sources and consequently encourages other dispersed coyotes to move in. Decades of eradication efforts in the early 1900s took a toll on the coyote population in Illinois and in the 1950s they were considered uncommon. However, by the 1970s, numbers began to rebound and now it is not uncommon to spot a coyote running in a field, crossing the road, or even trotting through a backyard.

Another key to their mortality is that coyotes dine on a wide variety of food—90% of a coyote's diet consists of small mammals, primarily rabbits and small rodents like voles and mice. But, they also eat insects like grasshoppers and beetles, as well as frogs, snakes, lizards, birds, fish, carrion, ground squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons and fruit. In populated areas they will scavenge from dumpsters and garbage cans and the occasional road kill. Biologists estimate that an adult coyote needs to eat at least 1.3 pounds of meat each day to stay healthy. This is equivalent to roughly 13 mice every day or one large rabbit every five days. Coyotes do not always eat regularly and depending on their source of food and how much they eat, they may not eat for many days.

## Coyote Characteristics

Coyotes are often described as resembling a small German shepherd with long legs, a grayish tan to reddish-gray hair, with a whitish belly and throat, and a bushy tail. They stand with a shoulder height of 24 inches and a body length of 27–36 inches. Males can weigh 30–35 pounds and females slightly smaller between 25–40 pounds. In places where coyotes aren't disturbed by people, their life span can be up to 13 years; where humans are a threat, a coyote rarely lives past age 4 or 5.

Coyotes can live on their own or within a pack. A pack usually consists of a mated "alpha" pair, new young-of-the-year, and perhaps offspring from previous years. Home ranges can reach up to 70 miles, but recent research of urban coyotes show a roaming range of 10–25 miles. Like other canines, coyotes are very territorial and mark their territory with urine or scat. Members of the pack share the duties of guarding the food and the territory. Also like many predators, coyotes keep their own numbers in check, only the alpha female breeds in each pack. Coyotes commonly stay together for life, with mating occurring February and March and pups being born in April or May. Coyote pups are born between late February and April. When pups are 2 to 3 months old, they moved from their cozy den to sleeping outside with their parents and the rest of the pack. They practice hunting grasshoppers and mice. By August when the pups are 4-5 months old, they join in on the hunting. By fall the pups look more like adults. Their snouts have lengthened, and their fur has lightened.



## Curious Coyote Facts:

- Coyotes are great communicators vocalizing at least 11 different sounds such as the familiar lone howl, the yipping and barking and the group howl. Coyotes use their voices to establish territory, signal a warning, indicate location, and send greetings.
- The Coyote's Latin name, *Canis latrans*, translates to "barking dog."
- The best runner among the canids, a coyote can leap 14 feet and run 25–30 mph, reaching speeds up to 40 mph over short distances.
- Coyotes are strong swimmers and won't hesitate to follow prey into the water.
- The expansion of coyotes across the U.S. is largely due to the nearly successful attempts to exterminate the gray wolf, a coyote predator.
- The coyote has earned a place in many Native American folk stories often portrayed as a prankster or trickster. It is also referred to as the Medicine Dog, Brother, Old Man Coyote and Little Wolf.
- Early settlers referred to the coyote as prairie wolf. This name was possibly coined to distinguish it from the timber wolf, which also roamed the frontier.



## Frequently Asked Questions:

### Why are coyotes coming so close to my house?

The rapid development of McHenry County has caused a tremendous loss of natural habitat, bringing coyotes closer to urban areas. Easy food sources such as pet food, open garbage cans, and birdseed all attract coyotes to residential areas.

### There are children in the neighborhood and we've seen a coyote. Do we need to be concerned?

Healthy coyotes are not known to attack humans. A child has a greater chance of being bitten by a pet dog or cat than by a coyote. Teach your children never to approach any wild animal, including coyotes.

### What should I do if a coyote approaches me?

Coyotes are typically frightened off by aggressive gestures, such as moving towards the animal while waving your arms and shouting in a loud, deep voice. If you are walking with a pet, pick it up or shorten the leash so that it remains close to you. Do not turn your back on or run from the coyote and, if possible, move towards an area of activity.

### Will a coyote eat my pet?

Some pets, especially small dogs and cats, might be seen as potential prey by coyotes. A larger dog can be seen as a threat to a coyote's security and the coyote will want to drive it away from its territory. This is especially true if a den or pups are nearby. Keep pets in a secured area or on a leash when outside or accompany them, especially at night, to ensure their safety.

### Is it OK to feed a coyote?

No. NEVER FEED ANY WILD ANIMAL, including coyotes. Feeding coyotes teaches them to associate humans with food, eventually making them very bold and unafraid.

