

Nature News:

Sharing the Landscape with Coyotes

By Angela McLaughlin ~ THE JOURNAL

Coyotes may be found scouring the grasslands for field mice and other small rodents.

PHOTO BY ANGELA MCLAUGHLIN

"The last word in ignorance is the man who says of the animal, 'What good is it?'"

Aldo Leopold, conservationist, forester, and author of "Land Ethic"

Life in the backcountry is full of beauty, open spaces and wildlife. Living in close proximity to wildlife has its blessings and curses, but learning more about the fascinating creatures that we share our landscape with may help us appreciate it even more.

One critter commonly found on the landscape is the coyote. An iconic symbol of the Southwest, it is an animal that has been feared, vilified and persecuted for more than a hundred years. Often portrayed as a "trickster" in Native American mythology, this interesting canid has also been referred to as a "prairie dog" or "prairie wolf."

Though they continue to battle a negative public image, coyotes have learned to adapt and thrive on a changing landscape. And as humans find themselves living in a closer vicinity to them, we are learning just how beneficial they are to the ecosystem.

As an opportunistic feeder, coyotes both hunt and scavenge for food. And they are not strict carnivores, as they will consume rotten fruit and vegetables, among other things.

Christine Barton, Director of Operations at the Fund for Animals Wildlife Center, says the main food source for coyotes in our area is field mice. They consume small rodents such as mice, gophers, voles and ground squirrels — animals that

may cause destruction to a garden or home.

In addition to keeping the populations of prey animals under control, Keli Hendricks, Ranching with Wildlife Coordinator for Project Coyote, says they also help contain the spread of diseases, such as chronic wasting disease, hantaviruses and Lyme disease.

But they were not always so appreciated. As a target of anti-predator campaigns that began in the early 1900s, coyotes battled a mindset of "the only good predator is a dead one." Somehow, they persevered through a movement that almost entirely wiped out wolves, mountain lions and other large predators. But it came at the cost of millions of coyote lives.

Hendricks shared the story of what happened in Kern County, California, when by 1927, the entire farming community was devoid of coyotes and other predators.

"Nature finally fought back," says Hendricks. "The county came under siege by millions of rodents. Populations were estimated at millions of mice per acre of land. The mice, without natural predators to control their numbers, devastated crops and invaded homes. It was the single greatest rodent invasion in U.S. history."

Barton adds that when predators are allowed on the terrain, the result is a healthier landscape.

"There is a balance, and there's a reason that they're there," says Barton.

While other types of canids spread around the globe via land bridges, coyotes evolved as a distinctive

species right here in North America — and have existed on the continent for more than a million years.

Though they do not live in large packs the way wolves do, their family unit is still referred to as a "pack." They are often seen as a lone coyote, as it is common for them to live and travel by themselves outside of breeding and pup-rearing season.

Coyotes are one of a small number of mammals that are monogamous. Males and older siblings help to raise the pups. A typical litter size is four to six pups, and several studies have shown that they can increase their reproductive rate when populations are decimated in an area — litter sizes can jump to a dozen or more pups to make up for the population decrease.

"If they're taken out of an area, and that area has an abundance of

resources, they will repopulate," says Barton. "Their bodies balance it out and stabilize the population."

This is part of a phenomenon that biologists refer to as "fission-fusion adaptation," which also includes the coyotes' abilities to function individually or as a pack, depending on whether or not they are being threatened.

Barton says coyote territories may overlap, and different individuals can live together in harmony if needed.

"They may have an understanding or an agreement to exist in the same area but not necessarily side-by-side."

A highly intelligent animal, one of the most fascinating tidbits about the coyote is their vocalizations. Walking outside at dawn or dusk, residents may be serenaded by what sounds like a large number of coyotes. Hendricks says this is referred



Coyotes are most active at dawn and dusk.

PHOTO BY CHRISTINE BARTON



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to as the “Beau Geste” effect (from the P.C Wren novel and Gary Cooper film about three soldiers who hold a fort against the odds by making their numbers seem greater than they actually are) which can make two coyotes sound like a dozen. The nightly symphony plays another role — it helps them take a “census” of the number of coyotes in the area.

These crepuscular animals — most active during dawn and dusk — are surprisingly small in stature, weighing an average of 25 pounds for Western coyotes and 35 pounds for Eastern coyotes. It is their double-coat that gives them a false appearance of being larger.

Some residents may be wary of having coyotes near their homes. If resident coyotes are not causing problems, it is advised to let them remain. Creating space for new coyotes to move in may cause unwanted encounters as they acclimate.

“The newbies have to test the waters, to figure out the rules and boundaries. It is more beneficial to the species and to people to allow an unproblematic population to establish their own territories and teach the rules,” says Barton.

Homeowners should avoid leaving out food that may attract coyotes and other animals. Products such as Coyote Rollers and Dig Defence may also keep them out of

the yard — as well as flags placed on fences. Coyotes are wary of new things, and will be less likely to approach a situation where they feel uncomfortable.

During visual encounters, hazing techniques that utilize multisensory methods — such as loud noises, light and motion — are normally effective. It is important to be consistent with hazing, and continue until the animal has disappeared. Though seeing wildlife is exciting, it is vital that wild animals not get habituated to humans.

The coyote is a master of adaptation and has proven its worth to the ecosystem, managing to thrive where others have failed.

“We could learn a lot from coyotes who have mastered the art of remaining flexible and adaptable in the face of change,” says Hendricks.

And changing mindsets will hopefully allow them to continue to benefit the environment in which we live.

“We’re all part of the system — it’s finding that balance and coexisting with each other and respecting each other,” says Barton. “And it’s understanding that we both need our space.”

So, the next time you hear the familiar yipping noises at dusk, pause for a moment to appreciate this captivating animal with which we share our landscape. ■

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