

Living with Coyotes

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The coyote is a southwestern icon. How often do we see t-shirts, coasters, and other items displaying the profile of a seated coyote with her nose in the air, mouth open, howling at the moon (bandana optional)? Arizona may lead the nation in coyote tourist items, but real coyotes can be found in 49 of the 50 United States as well as Canada and Mexico (there are no coyotes in Hawaii...yet). Understanding the habits of coyotes will help minimize damage to crops, livestock, pets, and property while helping us appreciate their benefits.

The adult coyote (*Canis latrans*) weighs 20 to 40 pounds with males usually being larger than females. With large erect ears, slender muzzle, and bushy tail, they resemble a small collie dog. The voice of the coyote is quite distinctive, consisting of various howls, high-pitched yaps, and occasional dog like barks. Coyotes are most active at night and during the early morning and late evening hours. In areas where they are not disturbed by human activities, and during the cooler times of the year, they may be active throughout the day.

The primary diet of the coyote consists of mice, rats, ground squirrels, gophers, rabbits, and carrion. They are proficient predators, possessing the speed, strength, and endurance necessary to tackle prey as large as adult deer. Coyotes also eat insects, reptiles, amphibians, fruits, juniper berries, birds and their eggs, and deer or pronghorn fawns. In some cases, coyotes prey heavily on sheep, calves, and poultry. In urban and suburban areas, garbage, domestic cats and dogs, other pets, hobby animals, and pet food can be important food sources.

Coyotes breed mainly during January, February, and March. The gestation period is about 60-63 days. The young are born March through May, with litter sizes averaging 5-6 pups. Coyotes produce one litter per year. They are weaned at 5 to 6 weeks and leave the parents at 6 to 9 months. Usually, less than half of the litter survives the first year. Most adults first breed in their second year. Non-breeding,

yearling, coyotes often stay with the adult parents and help care for the pups. Coyote dens are found in steep banks, rock crevices, sinkholes, and underbrush. Coyote dens are often holes that have been used by badger, skunks, foxes, or other animals, with entrances enlarged to about one foot in diameter.

We can minimize conflicts with coyotes by limiting their access to food, water, and shelter. Garbage can lids should be secured at all times or garbage stored indoors. Pets should be fed and watered indoors. Ripe fruits and vegetables should be covered at night or the garden/fruit trees enclosed by a coyote proof fence to prevent access by hungry coyotes. All windfall fruit/vegetables should be picked up daily. In areas where predation on pets has been documented, cats and small dogs should not be left out after dark unless enclosed in a coyote proof enclosure. Food should never intentionally be left out for wild animals (except some birds). This alters their preference for native foods, changes their natural behavior, and habituates them to human activity.

To exclude coyotes, fences should be at least 5½ feet tall. These can be made of solid wood, cement blocks, brick, or wire. If net wire fencing is used, the bottom portion should be at least 3½ feet tall with squares smaller than 6 inches. All fences should have some sort of galvanized wire apron buried at least 4 to 6 inches in the ground which extends out from the fence at least 15 to 20 inches. The apron should be securely attached to the bottom of the fence. Coyotes are very adept diggers and prefer to dig under fences rather than jump them. Brush and vegetation should be cleared from backyards and adjacent areas to eliminate habitat for prey which could attract coyotes.

There have been rare instances of coyotes attacking humans and most of these have been on children under the age of 5. While there are several confirmed records of such attacks, the risk is much greater of being attacked by domestic dogs. It is also legal to hunt coyotes provided the hunter is licensed and following current hunting regulations set out by the Arizona Game and Fish Department.