

The Coyote

by Philip S. Gipson



There were few, if any, coyotes in Arkansas when the earliest settlers arrived. Starting about 1940, coyotes spread through Arkansas from Oklahoma and Texas. They reached the Mississippi River by 1964.

Description and Distribution

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are about the size of small collie dogs. They are reddish-gray in color, and from a distance they look like very tall foxes. Adult male coyotes weigh 25-37 pounds; adult females weigh 22-23 pounds. Coyotes weighing 40 pounds are rare, and coyote-like animals that weigh 50 pounds or more are likely to be dogs or crosses with dogs.

Coyotes occur in all Arkansas counties. They tolerate man and commonly establish dens in brush piles or near abandoned farm buildings. Coyotes are often seen in parks and around garbage dumps.

Habitat

Coyotes favor brushy fields with persimmon trees, blackberry thickets and tall weeds. They are most abundant along forest edges near pastures and crop lands and are often found around clearings where trees have been harvested.

Habits

The first evidence of nearby coyotes is often the high-pitched “yip-yip-yihwool” calls they make in late evening and near daybreak. The calls may be spontaneous, but they usually follow a siren, train whistle or other loud sound.

During the courting and breeding season, from late December through March, male and female coyotes form pair bonds and are almost constant

companions. As pups develop, they accompany each other and the adults on forays. Many pups abandon the family home range and disperse to new areas by late November. Others remain near their parents and interact with them for years, at times even helping with future litters of pups.

A concentration of one coyote per 2-4 square miles is a typical density for most of Arkansas; highest concentrations around poultry dumps or other sources of food may number 2-3 per square mile.

Coyote diets vary. Common foods include mice, rats, rabbits, birds, insects and other small animals. Dead chickens and turkeys, available from dumps around poultry

operations, are important foods. Coyotes also catch fawns, wild turkeys and small domestic animals as large as 2-3 week old calves. Persimmons are a preferred food during

autumn, and other wild fruits are eaten when available. Watermelons, cantaloupes and occasionally corn and other garden vegetables are also eaten.



Reproduction

Coyotes pair for life or until one of the pair dies. Females give birth from late April through early May, 60-63 days after breeding. Litters contain 2-10 pups, usually 4-6. Females prepare one or more dens shortly before they give birth. Dens vary from burrows dug in banks to cavities beneath brush piles and rock slides to openings under abandoned farm buildings.

Coyotes readily hybridize with wild dogs, and the offspring of such crosses (coydogs) are fertile. In Arkansas coyote crosses usually breed with coyotes, producing young which generally look like typical coyotes, although some are black or even spotted.

Coyotes can also mate with red wolves, and extensive hybridization of coyotes and wolves in the 1930s and '40s was largely responsible for the demise of the now-endangered red wolf. Animals seen today which resemble wolves in size, coloration or other characteristics may be the result of crosses between coyote/ wolf hybrids or coyotes and large dogs. Contrary to popular belief, there are no true wolves now known to occur in Arkansas.

Importance

In years past, about 600,000 coyote pelts, valued at over \$30 million, were marketed annually in North America. Most in Arkansas are taken in the Ozark Mountains and in the Arkansas River Valley. Pelts are used for wall hangings

and trim on coats, caps and gloves.

Calling coyotes with a predator call that mimics an injured rabbit is a popular sport. Coyotes often rush within 10 or 15 feet of the caller. A quick observer can snap a photo or get a shot at the coyote before it flees. A loud howl or a siren can be used to stimulate coyotes to howl.

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Coyotes are an important part of natural ecological systems in Arkansas. By catching small mammals and birds, they help maintain a balance between these creatures and their food supplies. As scavengers on dead animals, they help clean up the woods and fields.

Management

Coyotes are classified as furbearers in Arkansas, and seasons are established for hunting and trapping them.

Management of coyotes is controversial. Proponents of coyotes want to increase their numbers: wildlife watchers want to see coyotes and hear their howling; predator hunters enjoy calling coyotes or running them with dogs; and trappers make extra money from coyote pelts. Yet, some livestock producers and melon growers suffer substantial losses to coyotes, and these people would like to see coyote numbers reduced.

In most cases, coyotes don't influence game abundance. But there are exceptions, such as when turkeys are introduced or deer populations are extremely low. Limited reduction of coyote numbers may help increase game populations in these situations.

Coyotes are thriving in Arkansas, and no formal management program is required to maintain viable populations. Land use patterns developed over the last 40 years are beneficial to coyotes. Present agricultural patterns and timber industry practices provide brushy areas and forest edge preferred by coyotes. Food and cover are plentiful for coyotes in all areas of the state, except possibly some intensively farmed areas of the Mississippi Delta.



Arkansas Game & Fish Commission

2 Natural Resources Drive
Little Rock, Arkansas 72205

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