

Call of the Wild

by Mike Watson, *conservation biologist*

In Native American mythology, coyote is a trickster and a wise man; both the creator of the world and the tribes, and a sucker who is outsmarted by other animals. Today, the coyote still evokes mixed feelings. But, love them or hate them, coyotes are here to stay.

The coyote, *Canis latrans*, is very closely related to domestic dogs and wolves; in fact, all three are capable of interbreeding and producing viable offspring. These three canids can also be very similar in appearance, so it's not unusual for coyote sightings to be reported as wild dogs or wolves. Coyotes are far smaller than wolves, weighing in at 30-50 pounds versus the wolf's 80-100 pounds. The coyote's lanky frame and bushy coat make them appear larger, though.

Coloration varies, but typically coyotes are a mix of greys, browns and white, usually with a dark band running down their back, and black markings on the fronts of their legs. They often resemble a medium-sized German Shepherd. A coyote holds its tail low when running, as opposed to a dog which holds its tail parallel to the ground or higher.

Coyotes are relatively new to Ohio, probably arriving about 100 years ago. They are a highly adaptable prairie species that was able to expand its range east as wolf numbers declined. As the Midwest was settled, humans killed or drove off large predators, such as wolves, mountain lions, bobcats and black bears. This created a sort of predator vacuum, which the coyote has been able to exploit.

The coyotes that are moving into the eastern United States appear to have taken two routes. One group traveled east across the northern Midwest to arrive in western Ohio in the early 1900s. The coyotes that we see at The Holden Arboretum are from this group. Another group, moving much faster, traveled north around the Great Lakes, through Canada, and then south into the United States. DNA evidence shows that along the way, these coyotes interbred with wolves, resulting in larger coyotes with more wolf-like behaviors. These coyotes have moved into New York, parts of Pennsylvania and much of the northeastern United States.

Coyotes typically live in small family groups made up of dominant adults and one or two generations of offspring. Mating, pup birth and rearing occurs during the months of February through June. During this period, coyotes will be extra vigilant when defending their territory. Pups spend much of their time in and around the den and begin learning to hunt at roughly two months of age. Older offspring help raise new pups and defend the territory. Hunting is usually done alone or in pairs; coyotes typically do not hunt in packs to take down large game. Their diet consists of rodents, rabbits, other small mammals, snakes, eggs, fruit and carrion. Coyotes will take advantage of non-wild food, such as dog food and trash as well.

These highly intelligent animals quickly adapt to humans, but generally avoid contact with people. As a matter

of fact, hundreds of coyotes live in Chicago and its suburbs, but are rarely seen by their human neighbors. Radio-collar studies of the Chicago coyotes show that homeranges are limited to the areas with the lowest levels of human development, such as small parks, and that the coyotes generally avoid the areas with high human densities, such as residential neighborhoods.

Coyotes have been seen across Holden property, with multiple sightings in Pierson Valley and Strong Acres. Many of the reports of coyotes in Pierson Valley and Strong Acres come from hikers walking dogs during the denning season - February through June. The behavior of coyotes in this area suggests that at least one mating pair has established territory and raised young nearby. During the mating/denning season coyotes are on high alert and consider dogs to be especially threatening. Hikers without dogs rarely see coyotes, even during the denning season.



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As relatively large carnivores, care must be taken around coyotes. Though they generally avoid interacting with humans, there have been a number of reported injuries, though none at Holden. Nearly every one of these incidents resulted from an animal that was being fed, either intentionally or unintentionally. When this happens, the coyote can become accustomed to the presence of humans and the chances of an interaction increase. Some simple things you can do to reduce the chances of an incident include: keeping pet food indoors, securing lids on trash cans, turning on a light and checking the yard before letting pets out a night,

and keeping your pets on a leash.

If you are hiking and encounter a coyote that doesn't run away or that approaches you, you should face the animal and maintain eye contact. Opening your coat or spreading your arms will make you appear larger. Yelling at the animal may help scare it away. If it does not run, you should slowly back away while maintaining eye contact. Do not turn and run as this could trigger a predatory chase instinct. If you have a pet with you, keep it on leash and under control.

Remember, you are several times bigger than the coyote and they do not think of you as prey. They are simply concerned about your presence in their territory; perhaps they have young pups that are venturing out of the den. They do not want a conflict, but just want to ensure the safety of their family. So if you do not act threatening and do not act like prey by running there is no reason for the coyote to come any closer. They may follow you until you leave their territory and then trot back to keep an eye out for other potential threats.

If you do encounter a coyote that is aggressive or territorial, please contact the Holden Police Department or leave a message at the information desk at the Warren H. Corning Visitor Center.