

The Wiley Coyote

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The history of Ohio's wildlife is rife with success and failure stories. White-tailed Deer, Osprey, Bald Eagles, River Otters, Lake Erie Watersnakes and many more have all been successfully reintroduced or kept from becoming extirpated or extinct. Other stories are not as pleasing: rattlesnake populations decline every year; Passenger Pigeons, Carolina Parakeets, and Blue Pike are extinct; Bison, Elk, the Regal Fritillary, and others will probably never become part of Ohio's wildlife again. All of these successes and failures have one thing in common: Humans. Through habitat loss/restoration or persecution, humans have had a hand in helping or hurting these animals. There is one animal that has benefited from both our land ethic and persecution, the Coyote. Love it or hate it, the Coyote is here to stay.

The Coyote, *Canus latrans*, can attain sizes comparable to medium-sized dogs. From studies, average weights are between 30 and 45 pounds. While the majority is a grayish tone, colors can range from rusty-brown colors to off-white. The one character that usually helps with ID is the tip of the tail, which is black. They feed mostly on shrews, rabbits, and small rodents, but being an omnivore, they are also fond of fruits, grasses, and vegetables. When hunting in pairs or small unrelated groups, they may also incorporate fawns or weakened adult deer into their diet. Being an opportunist, one cannot neglect carrion from their menu, or the occasional visit to pastures and barnyards for livestock.

Never native to Ohio's fauna, the Coyote was common west of the Mississippi River where it roamed the plains, scrub lands, and deserts. While our ancestors were busy clearing land (habitat change) and removing the Coyote's biggest competitor the wolf (persecution), Coyotes moved in. Slowly emigrating east of the Mississippi, they found a home in Ohio, with the first record occurring in 1919. Today, they are present in all 88 counties and most states in the lower 48. A pair even showed up in New York City in 1995! This emigration and subsequent settling is testament to their great adaptability.

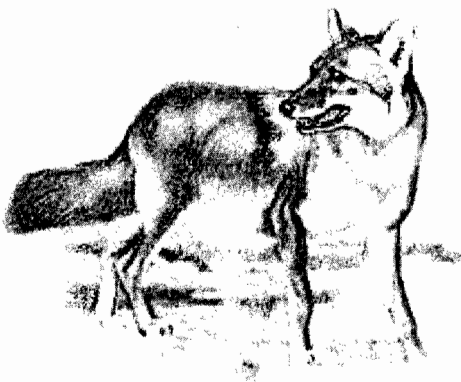
With adaptability comes a greater chance for species survival. Even when Coyotes feel pressures from humans, they can adapt their food source, their shelter choice, or water hole. Garbage left out can become a meal for a hungry Coyote; overgrown railroad yards or rail beds will be a place for a litter of pups; water garden/features can be their new water source. As with any wild animal living in close proximity to people, encounters are going to occur.

In the news, stories are told of Coyotes attacking hikers, carrying off a two-year old, or killing the "house" pet. The one common thread with Coyotes and encounters with humans is feeding, either intentional or unintentional. Intentional feeding might include throwing scraps out or having a bait site. Unintentional feeding is leaving garbage out, having pet food on the porch, or even bird feeders, which attract some of the Coyote's prey. One way to avoid this is simple: DO NOT FEED WILD ANIMALS. Should we stop feeding birds? Well, if coyotes are deciding they like the meal that you "provide", take the feeders down for a while. To make sure "Wile E" doesn't get Fluffy, your cat should be kept in the house. By keeping Coyotes from being accustomed to people and our habits, the risk of attack, or even seeing one, is greatly reduced to never happening.

While scanning the internet for "coyote attacks", one would be appalled at (I'm going to say it) the stupidity of some people. Pestering an injured Coyote leads to an "attack"; trying to coax one up close leads to an

"attack". Stan Gehrt, in his study on Coyotes in Cook County, Illinois, said it best: most incidents are difficult for the public to interpret and place into the proper perspective. If you were the one who was "attacked", would you tell the reporter it came from the brush and attacked; or, would you tell them you were trying to coax a Coyote to feed from your hand and then it "attacked"?

To put this into perspective, in the "Cook County Project", it was noted that no one was bitten by a Coyote, yet in that same year there were over 3000 domestic dog bites. Do Coyotes pose a threat to people? By making sure that we don't provide the appropriate habitat for 'yotes in and around our properties, we can rest assured that we'll be free from "attacks". Yet one thing is certain: the Coyote is here to stay.



Naturalist note: Look for an upcoming Coyote program in the winter quarter.