CHAPTER 6

Coyotes and Wolves

In pioneer days, coyotes (Canis latrans) were restricted primarily to the sagebrush lands, brushy mountains, and open prairies of the American West. Wolves occupied the forests. Coyotes have since taken advantage of human activities (including the reduction of gray wolf populations) to expand their range throughout North and Central America.

In the Pacific Northwest, these intelligent and adaptable animals manage to occupy almost every conceivable habitat type, from open ranch country to densely forested areas to downtown waterfront. Despite ever-increasing human encroachment and past efforts to eliminate coyotes, the species maintains its numbers and is increasing in some areas. The coyote’s tenacity tries some people’s patience and inspires others’ admiration.

At first glance, the coyote resembles a small German shepherd dog, yet its color can vary from animal to animal (Fig. 1 and back cover). Shades include black, brown, gray, yellow, rust, and tan. Coyotes also have shorter, bushier tails that are carried low, almost dragging the ground, and longer, narrower muzzles than their dog cousins. Adult coyotes weigh 20 to 35 pounds (9–16 kg), with males being slightly larger than females. At the shoulder, an adult male coyote is about 25 inches (65 cm) tall.

For information on wolves, see “Notes on Gray Wolves.”

Facts about Coyotes

Food and Feeding Habits

- Coyotes are opportunists, both as hunters and as scavengers. They eat any small animal they can capture, including mice, rats, voles, gophers, mountain beavers, rabbits, and squirrels, also snakes, lizards, frogs, fish, birds, and carrion (animal carcasses). Grass, fruits, and berries are eaten during summer and fall.
- Grasshoppers and other insects are important to juvenile coyotes learning the stalk-and-pounce method of hunting.

Figure 1. Coyotes in the Pacific Northwest are usually solitary. The so-called “bands” or “packs” of coyotes are almost always family groups composed of a mother and her young. (During the mating period, a group may include a female and several males.) (From Christensen and Larrison, Mammals of the Pacific Northwest: A Pictorial Introduction.)
• Pairs of coyotes or family groups using the relay method pursue deer and antelope. These large mammals are important food in winter; fawns may be eaten in spring.
• Coyotes eat wild species, but they are known to eat pet food, garbage, garden crops, livestock, poultry, and pets (mostly cats).
• Coyotes occasionally kill domestic dogs (and foxes) that they consider territorial intruders. Coyotes are also very protective of their young and will attack dogs that get too close to their den and pups. **Note:** The list of killers of domestic cats and dogs includes other dogs and cats, vehicles, bears, cougars, bobcats, foxes, disease, and furious neighbors!
• Most hunting activity takes place at night. Undisturbed and hungry coyotes will hunt during daylight hours, and may be seen following farm machinery, catching voles and other small prey.

**Den Sites**
• The female coyote digs her own den under an uprooted tree, log, or thicket; may use a cave, hollow log, or storm drain; or take over and enlarge another mammal’s burrow.
• The den will have an entrance 1 to 2 feet (30–60 cm) across, be dug 5 to 15 feet (1.5–4.5 m) long, and terminate in an enlarged nesting chamber.
• Coyotes usually have several dens and move from one to the other, minimizing the risk that a den containing young will be detected. These moves also help to prevent an accumulation of fleas and other parasites, as well as urine, droppings, and food refuse.
• Coyotes use the same dens yearly or make new dens in the same area.

**Reproduction and Family Structure**
• Occasionally, a mated pair of coyotes will live, hunt, and raise pups together for many years, sometimes for life.
• Breeding occurs in late winter. After a gestation (pregnancy) of 63 days, an average of four pups are born from early April to late May. (Litter size can be affected by population density and food availability.)
• The young are principally cared for by the female; occasionally a nonbreeding sibling will assist with raising the litter. The male provides some food for the mother and the young.
• Pups emerge from the den in two to three weeks and begin to eat regurgitated food. Because food requirements increase dramatically during pup rearing, this is a period when conflicts between humans and coyotes are common.
• Juvenile coyotes usually disperse alone or sometimes in groups at six to eight months of age. A few may stay nearby, while others seek new territory up to 50 miles (80 km) away. The greater the amount of food available in a given area, the closer the juveniles will stay to their den.
• Coyotes can interbreed with domestic dogs and wolves; however, such crosses are rare.

**Mortality and Longevity**
• Coyote numbers are controlled by social stress, diseases, parasites, competition for food, and predators.
• Predators include humans, cougars, wolves, black bears, and other coyotes. Eagles, dogs, and adult coyotes kill some coyote pups.
• Where coyotes are hunted, trapped, and poisoned, females produce more pups per litter than in areas where they are protected.
• Coyotes in captivity live as long as 18 years. In the wild, few coyotes live more than four years; the majority of pups die during their first year.

**Viewing Coyotes**
Coyotes are extremely wary. Their sense of smell is remarkable, and their senses of sight and hearing are exceptionally well developed.

Sightings of coyotes are most likely during the hours just after sunset and before sunrise. To view a coyote, locate a well-used trail and wait patiently from an area overlooking a canyon, ravine, or other area. A coyote will often come down the trail the same time every morning or evening. Also, you could watch a coyote’s feeding area, such as a livestock or big game carcass.

By six months of age, pups have permanent teeth and are nearly fully grown. At about this time, female coyotes train their offspring to search for food, so it is not unusual to observe a family group.

Never approach an occupied coyote den. A mother’s protective instincts can make her dangerous if she has young in or nearby the den. Den sites, and coyote activity, should be observed with binoculars or a spotting scope from a distance that does not visibly disturb the animals. Unfamiliar or