



# Coyote:

By Clifford L. Brown

There is a new beast in the East. No, it is not the West Virginia Mountaineers, Pitt Panthers, Penn State Nittany Lions or the Virginia Tech Hokies. The new beast in the East is the eastern coyote. Once an icon of the West, coyotes have become established over the past 30 years in the Eastern United States, including West Virginia.

## Life History

Larger than their counterparts in the West, adult eastern coyotes weigh 30 to 45 pounds, although some exceptional animals over 60 pounds have been reported. Standing almost two feet tall and 41 to 53 inches long, coyotes are about the size of a medium-sized dog. Fur color varies from pale to almost black, with a grizzled gray brown, like that of a German shepherd, the most common color. A long slim muzzle, yellow eyes and a bushy tail carried low are characteristics that help identify coyotes. Tracks are 1½ to 2 inches wide and 2 to 3 inches long. The front heel pad is larger than the rear and generally only the two middle claw marks appear in the tracks.

Coyotes are monogamous and mate for life because both parents care for their young. Breeding occurs during January through March. The gestation period is approximately 63 days and litter sizes range from 1 to 12 pups. Pups begin to venture from the den at 3 to 4 weeks of age, and begin to learn hunting skills at 8 to 10 weeks of age. The family unit stays and hunts together until late fall when they leave to establish territories of their own. On some occasions,

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# An Adaptable Pioneer

young females will remain within the home territory into the next year. Young males may travel in excess of 50 miles in attempts to establish a new territory.

Often classed as carnivores, in reality coyotes are omnivores and will consume almost anything. Analysis of stomach contents and scat reveal fruits, berries, vegetables, small rodents, deer, livestock, birds, insects, carrion and even garbage. Obviously, the presence of deer and livestock in the diet of coyotes has caused the most concern for hunters and landowners. Sheep producers in West Virginia have suffered the most loss by predation and have been provided some relief through a cooperative effort by the Division of Natural Resources and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services. Hunters should note that in the results of a recent study on white-tailed deer fawn survival, only 9 percent of total losses was attributed to coyotes. Given the varied diet of coyotes, it is unlikely that they will limit deer numbers in West Virginia.

Other than humans, coyotes have few enemies and adult survival is relatively high. However, coyotes are subject to a variety of diseases including distemper, mange, canine hepatitis and rabies. They also play host to a number of parasites such as round worms, tapeworms, flukes, ticks, fleas and lice.

## Population Status

By all accounts, the coyote population in West Virginia has risen rapidly during the past decade. As recently as the 1990s, local newspapers provided front page coverage of coyotes harvested by local hunters and trappers. In both the most

recent Spring Gobbler Survey and Bowhunter Survey compiled by the Wildlife Resources Section, hunters reported the highest number of coyote sightings ever. Records from the West Virginia Trappers Association fur auctions and from fur dealer reports have shown an increase in the number of coyotes harvested from 13 in 1996 to 539 in 2004.

## Coyote-Human Interaction

As coyote populations increase, so do interactions with humans. In some counties, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services provides support for coyote depredation of livestock. Licensed Wildlife Damage Control agents are available to provide assistance to landowners. In some cases, the West Virginia Trappers Association can provide the name of a trapper with experience in trapping coyotes.

Coyotes are wary of humans and typically avoid close contact. In recent years, however, increasing levels of coyote-human interactions, including attacks, have been reported. Generally close encounters with coyotes are the result of a loss of fear and associating humans with available food resources. Some simple precautions can reduce or eliminate the likelihood of such encounters. Pet food should not be left outside after dark, household garbage should be secured to prevent access, and feeding coyotes is only an invitation for trouble. Coyotes deserve the respect and caution offered any wild predator, without succumbing to irrational fear.

## Hunting/Trapping Techniques

This new predator also presents a new and unique sporting challenge for hunters and trappers alike. Both groups of sportsmen are still

learning how to successfully harvest this addition to our landscape. Hunters have found some success with predator calls. Mouth calls and electronic calls are both used, based on hunter skill and preference. Because coyotes possess keen eyesight, hearing and sense of smell, most successful hunters wear camouflage clothing, minimize movement on stand, and hunt downwind of calling locations.

Trappers have had to modify foothold traps and techniques to deal with a larger, stronger canine, but find that variations of fox sets are successful for coyotes. Trap types and sizes effective for capturing and holding coyotes are presented in *Best Management Practices for Trapping Coyotes in the Eastern United States*, a publication of the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Legal foothold traps for coyotes cannot have a jaw spread in excess of 6½ inches. Traps may not be set in human foot trails or livestock paths. All traps must be checked and tended daily. A new tool for capturing coyotes in West Virginia and many other eastern states are snares or cable restraints. Legal snares for land trapping in West Virginia must have a relaxing lock system designed with a breaking point of 350 pounds or less, or incorporate a stop that prevents the snare loop from closing to less than 2½ inches.

In West Virginia, there is a continuous open season on coyotes during the daylight hours. Currently, hunting coyotes at night with an artificial red- or amber-colored light is legal from January 1 through July 31. Legal firearms for hunting coyotes with an artificial light are rimfire rifles or handguns .22 caliber

or smaller, and shotguns with #4 or smaller shot. Flat-shooting rifles in .22-250, .223 or .243 calibers are good choices for daytime hunting. During the first three days of the bucks-only deer season, coyote hunting is legal. As with any deer firearms season, hunters must wear at least 400 square inches of blaze orange. Laser light or telescopic sights using a laser light are prohibited. When small game season is closed, coyotes may be hunted only in open fields. Remember to check with your local Conservation Officer or the Hunting and Trapping Regulations pamphlet if you have questions about coyote seasons and hunting requirements.

Whether you despise or admire it, this new predator is a permanent addition to the Mountain State. Obviously there are good and bad points to the eastern coyote becoming established here. If we can take advantage of the interest in new recreational opportunities and avoid the potential for negative interactions, we can learn to live with the new beast of the East. Beginning in 2006, hunters who purchase hunting licenses electronically will have the opportunity to donate \$2 to provide support for continued education and control efforts by the Division of Natural Resources.

For more information about coyotes check [www.wvdnr.gov](http://www.wvdnr.gov).

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