

## Coyotes In Our Midst

The Eastern Coyote (*Canis latrans var*) has been seen in every county in New Jersey, with confirmed sightings in West Amwell Township as well.

For over thirty years the coyote population has grown exponentially in New Jersey, from less than 100 to an estimated 3,000 animals.

Curiously, few people notice the wild canine in their midst. Their myopia stems in part from coyote's resemblance to a shy dog. The size of a small German Shepherd, the Eastern coyote measures four to five feet in length. Local coyotes typically weigh thirty-five to forty-five pounds. Their shaggy fur ranges from a blond-gray to a dark brown that appears almost black. Most people get little more than a quick view of the tail end disappearing into cover, which provides the only clue to the creature's identity; unlike a dog, the coyote carries its droopy, bushy tail downward.

Coyotes can mate with dogs, but usually don't. DNA testing has shown no difference between the coyote and the dog.

An opportunist to its core, a coyote will eat almost anything, from rodents to road kill. In the fall it gobbles up grasshoppers. It consumes garbage and amphibians. It loves blueberries and raspberries, but above all it loves ample food, and people provide regular windfalls. Human development – with its accompanying refuse and disruption of the indigenous ecosystem – makes surprisingly good coyote habitat. A coyote might claim a territory as large as 62 square miles. The suburban coyote can thrive in a territory that measures a scant five square miles.

It was only a matter of time before coyotes arrived in New Jersey. These animals are wily, highly adaptable, and long-ranging. Increasingly comfortable with humans and not averse to travel, coyotes have swum to islands off Massachusetts. One was caught in Manhattan. New Jersey must have been a no-brainer, with West Amwell providing all that is needed in life with large tracts of undeveloped lands, available forage and a high deer population.

And yet many seem unaware of the coyotes' presence. Coyotes tend to operate under the radar. Busiest during nighttime and the edge of the day, when they are less likely to meet humans face to face, coyotes work farmlands, picnic spots and backyards.

Coyotes generally mate for life. Coyotes have a remarkable ability to increase or decrease their litter size depending on competition for the food supply. The adults will settle into a den, with anywhere from four to eight pups to a spring litter. Both parents raise the young, sometimes with the help of older offspring who stick around until they must establish their own territories.

Coyotes have been in this area for about eighteen years. Overall, they have been behaving themselves. They mind their own business. They cause few problems, like bothering livestock or chasing pets or people.

To be sure, not all the bad press is unwarranted. In the spring, when they've denned up, coyotes will protect their territory. They might cede part of their range – a yard – to a large dog, but small dogs run the risk of being attacked. Some coyotes in northern New Jersey have killed sheep, poultry, and the occasional pet. However, this only puts them in league with bear, bobcats, dogs, great horned owls and cars.

Coyotes help restore the natural order. Coyote predation of feral cats helps migratory songbirds. They eat Canada geese eggs, and are among the few predators left in the state that hunt and consume deer. They feed on road kill and will kill fawns and sometimes adult deer.

Coyote urine has proven a reliable deer repellent, and is commercially available. Healthy, meat-fed coyotes release pheromones that scare off deer. Sprinkled around the perimeter of a garden, coyote urine will help gardeners protect their plants.

The coyote is likely here to stay. According to the NJ Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), New Jersey can potentially support a population of 5,000. Coyotes have a life span of only four years. In 2002 only twenty-three coyotes were taken during the various hunting seasons, but none were taken in Hunterdon County.

Coyote attacks on people are almost unknown. Domestic dogs pose a far greater threat. The challenge lies in sighting the wary animal. Only rarely do people get a chance to see a coyote. However, the coyote is frequently heard. In the winter, during the January to March breeding times, listen for nocturnal howls when coyotes are the most vocal.

Stop and listen.