

Living with coyotes

Lathrup Village Nature Club

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/227134751761831/>

What is a coyote?

The coyote (*Canis latrans*, “barking dog” because of its vocalizations) is a medium-size member of the dog family native to North America and common throughout Michigan. With pointed ears, a slender muzzle and a drooping, bushy tail, it may remind you of a German shepherd.

Coyotes can vary from silver-gray to black but are usually grayish brown with reddish tinges behind the ears and around the face and lighter fur on the throat and belly. The tail usually has a black tip; eyes are yellow. Adults weigh 25-35 pounds; fur is dense and thick, which may make them look bigger. Ears are pointed and stand up. When running, coyotes carry their tail down, usually below the level of their back.

In urban areas, coyotes prefer wooded patches and shrubbery (where they can hide) and will use any bit of habitat available, such as parks and golf courses. Active day and night, they are most active around sunrise and sunset. They have a home range in urban areas of 2 to 5 miles.

Breeding takes place in winter, with a gestation period of about 63 days. Coyote pups are born in dens and are completely dependent on milk for their first 10 days. In spring and summer, the mated pair and 4-7 pups occupy the home range. The pups are full size at 8-9 months of age and leave the den site in the fall.

If the den is disturbed, the pups are moved. The den is abandoned by June or July, but a single den can be reused for years. The coyote generally does not defend its territory outside of the denning season.

The coyotes’ diet is 90-percent carnivorous. Expert hunters and flexible eaters, they adapt to what is available: mice, voles, rabbits, squirrels, insects, fruits, berries, birds, frogs, snakes, even plants and seeds.

Coyotes can live alone, in mated pairs or in packs. In the wild, they live about three years. Though susceptible to diseases, including rabies, they are most often killed by cars.

Why here, why now?

Urban coyotes are a relatively recent phenomenon. Long resident in areas between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River, by the last decades of the 20th Century, coyotes had expanded into urban areas throughout the continent, from the Pacific to the Atlantic oceans, from Alaska to Panama, and from sparsely populated to very densely populated areas, including suburbs and cities. For example, in the Chicago area, coyotes were only found in forested areas outside the city until the 1990s, but have since moved into downtown Chicago, with populations in the area growing some 3,000 percent in 10 years.

Wildlife biologists attribute this amazing population growth and territorial expansion to several factors, including deforestation and conversion of land to agricultural use; the extermination of wolves, a natural predator and food source competitor; and the impressive adaptability of the species in terms of their unusually varied diet, and ability to manage their own population growth, territorial range, and pack size according to available food supplies.

The concerted effort to eliminate wolf populations is blamed for allowing the coyote to expand its range. But coyotes can be an asset to urban ecosystems, keeping a check on deer, rodents, Canada geese and other animals common in our suburbs.

Coyotes have an innate ability to control their own population, giving them an important role in maintaining the overall ecological balance. If a coyote is removed from its territory, whether through hunting or relocation, another coyote will move in. *(continued on other side.)*



Photo by Bob Fuerst

For more information
michigan.gov/wildlife
urbancoyoteresearch.com
humansociety.org/animals/coyotes
Projectcoyote.org
sterling-heights.net/315/Coyote-Facts
smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/city-slinkers-12208091/

Friend or foe?

Coyotes are generally not a threat to people. Although coyotes have been known to attack people, it is very rare and the attacking coyote was typically habituated, meaning it had lost its natural fear of humans, usually due to a person feeding the animals. It is important not to feed or try to make friends with coyotes. They are naturally very shy around people as they have been persecuted by hunting and trapping for well over 150 years.

Although coyotes have been known to attack humans (and pets) and as a result are a potential danger to people, especially small children, actual risks are minimal. It is believed that the majority of attack incidents could be reduced or prevented through changes in human behavior.

To help avoid conflict with coyotes:

- Never approach or touch a coyote
- Never intentionally feed a coyote
- Eliminate all outside food sources, especially pet foods
- Put garbage out the morning of pickup day
- Clear out wood and brush piles
- Accompany your pets outside, especially at dawn and dusk
- Never leave your pets, especially small dogs, unattended outside.

Coyotes are definitely a threat to smaller dogs (40 pounds and less). Larger dogs are seen as peers and may be subject to attack over territory or invited to play. Cats are at risk too and any other small pets, such as rabbits. Small pets should never be left outside unattended and always walked on a leash. Coyotes will attack and eat a small pet if the opportunity presents itself; however, small pets are not a natural prey source specifically sought out.

Now the good news: Coyotes in a suburban neighborhood help keep the small rodent population under control. Free-roaming cats have a tendency to avoid areas where there are coyotes. The benefit of fewer roaming and feral cats is less predation on songbirds. Coyotes are, in essence, protecting the urban forest from cat predation and saving the lives of songbirds.

Coyotes in the neighborhood indicate the area is environmentally healthy and well balanced. Coyotes are at the top of the food chain, meaning there are thriving food source populations all the way down the line. A healthy urban forest makes it safer and healthier for all of us.

To hear coyote vocalizations:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ga0i1FSXZQ>

Close encounters

When you see a coyote

...crossing a yard or street

This type of sighting generally requires no response—other than making sure that pets and children are secure and that there are no likely food attractants in the area.

...lounging in a yard or approaching/following people

Coyotes are naturally timid and will usually flee at the sight of a human. If they linger or approach, it's time to begin "hazing."

- Do not run away or turn your back. Do not play victim or try to make friends.
- If a coyote seems intent on defending an area, particularly around pupping season (May), alter your route to avoid conflict.
- Wave your arms, clap your hands, and shout in an authoritative voice.
- Make noise by banging pots and pans or using an air horn, which will also alert neighbors.
- Throw small stones, sticks, tennis balls or anything else you can lay your hands on. The intent is to scare, not injure.
- Spray with a hose, or a squirt gun filled with water and vinegar.
- Shake or throw a "coyote shaker"—an empty soda can filled with pennies or pebbles and sealed with duct tape.

The effects of hazing may not last unless all food attractants are permanently removed. This tactic is most effective when the entire neighborhood is working together. Hazing should never be attempted if the coyote is accompanied by pups or appears to be sick or injured. Remember; you do not want the coyotes getting comfortable lounging in your yard.

...failing to respond to hazing

If a coyote freezes and stares, or runs a short distance and stops, continue hazing until the coyote gets the message and leaves. Hazing can work whether the encounter is with a lone coyote or a small pack. If the leader retreats, the rest of the pack will follow. If the coyote refuses to retreat or returns to the area despite persistent hazing, it may be because someone is feeding them nearby. This is a cause for concern and should be reported to the city and/ or police.

...approaching a pet or a child

Problems are more likely to occur when a pet is out of the owner's control, so always walk your dog on a leash. Consider carrying a noisemaker, squirt gun or pepper spray. If a coyote approaches, pick up the pet or child, then start hazing. If the coyote does not leave, back away slowly while continuing to haze and go indoors if possible. Any aggressive behavior should be reported to police.