

## ALL ABOUT WASHINGTON COYOTES

### Washington Coyotes

In pioneer days, coyotes were restricted primarily to sagebrush lands, mountains and open prairies. Despite being extensively hunted, coyotes have since taken advantage of human activities to expand their range throughout the United States. Sightings are now common in every state and in both rural and urban settings. In Washington, these intelligent and adaptable animals occupy all types of habitat ranging from open ranch, forested areas to urban waterfronts and open spaces.



Coyotes thrive in suburban and urban settings and have adapted well to living in densely populated environments. Because of easy habitat and food sources, coyotes live in and around Clyde Hill.

At first glance, the coyote resembles a small German shepherd but coyotes have shorter, bushier tails that are carried low, almost dragging on the ground, and longer, narrower muzzles than their dog cousins. The coyote is brownish and gray with a light cream to white colored belly. In Western Washington coyotes are more reddish looking. A typical adult male weighs from 25 to 40 pounds and females weigh between 20 to 30 pounds.

### Food and Feeding Habits

Part of the coyote's success as a species is its dietary adaptability...they are very opportunistic hunters and scavengers who will eat just about anything. Most hunting activity takes place at night. Coyotes eat any small animal they can capture, including mice, rats, rabbits, squirrels, ducks, geese, snakes, frogs, birds, and carrion (animal carcasses). They also feed on grass, fruits and berries. Grasshoppers and other insects are important to juvenile coyotes learning the stalk and pounce method of hunting. A Washington Biologist found that an urban coyote's diet consists of mice and rats, fruits of all varieties, with 1/3rd of its diet being cats. Coyotes are also known to eat pet food, garbage and garden crops. Coyotes occasionally kill dogs they consider territorial intruders or will attack dogs that get too close to their den and pups.

Coyotes are nocturnal in their primary activities. They rarely if ever, hunt out new opportunities in daylight. Coyotes have habit routes and are often observed in the same places at similar times each night. If your property is on a regular route, the chances for a coyote contact is very real.

### Den Sites

The female coyote digs her own den that be found in storm drains, under sheds, holes dug in protected open areas, parks, golf courses or any other dark, dry place. The den's opening is 1 to 2 feet across, and the den is about 5 to 15 feet long terminating in an enlarged nesting chamber. Coyotes usually have several dens and move from one to the other, minimizing the risk that a den containing their young will be detected. Coyotes

use the same dens yearly or make new dens in the same area. 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 from a distance that does not visibly disturb the animals. Coyotes are perfectly happy to build dens in out-of-the-way urban areas and then forage the abundant food sources that cities provide.



### **Reproduction and Family Structure**

Occasionally, a mated pair of coyotes will live, hunt, and raise pups together for many years, sometimes for life. Coyotes breed in February and March and pups are born about 60 days later. An average coyote litter contains four or five pups that are born in early April to late May. A high reproductive rate and rapid growth of offspring aid in the coyote's success.

Pups are cared for by both parents and can eat meat and move about well by the time they are a month old. Because food requirements increase dramatically during pup rearing, this is a period when conflicts between humans and urban coyotes are common. By 6 months, pups have permanent teeth and are nearly fully grown. About this time, mother coyotes train their offspring to search for food so it's not unusual to observe a family group. If people deliberately or inadvertently provide food, the youngsters quickly learn not to fear humans and will develop a dependency on an easy food source.

After the early life training period most young coyotes disperse (October and November) and find their own breeding territory, but one or two pups may stay with the parents and become part of the family group. In the wild, few coyotes live for more than four years; the majority of pups die during their first year.

If you enjoy seeing coyotes and want a closer look at them, use binoculars. Don't ever put food out to lure them closer. Nearly all wild animal bites occur when people attempt to feed them or treat them like domestic animals. Enjoy watching wild animals, but don't lead them into temptation. Animals that lose their natural fear of humans are more likely to pose a danger to humans. Remember, all wild animals are unpredictable and caution is the watchword when they are around.

### **Coyote & Human Encounters**

Coyotes are curious but timid animals and will generally run away if challenged. However, any wild animal will protect itself or its young. Never be the instigator of a close encounter. If a coyote ever approaches too closely, pick up small children immediately and act aggressively toward the animal. Wave your arms, throw stones and shout at the coyote. If necessary make yourself appear larger by standing up (if sitting)

or stepping up onto a rock, stump, or stair. The idea is to convince the coyote that you are not prey, but a potential danger.

Coyote attacks on humans are uncommon and rarely cause serious injuries, due to their relatively small size. There were no documented coyote attacks on humans in Washington State until 2006. In April 2006, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife officers' killed two coyotes in Bellevue after two young children were bitten while their parents were nearby. Coyotes had also scratched and snapped at two women and charged a man in the same area. It was believed that the unusual aggressive behavior from this coyotes likely resulted from being fed by people in the area.

Humans increase the likelihood of conflicts with coyotes by deliberately or inadvertently feeding the animals, whether by handouts or by providing access to food sources such as garbage or pet food. When people provide food, coyotes quickly lose their natural fear of humans and become increasingly aggressive. They also become dependent on the easy food source people provide. Once a coyote stops hunting on its own and loses its fear of people, it becomes dangerous.

Overall, coyotes probably do humans more good than harm by keeping a natural balance between animals, such as rabbits, squirrels and rodents.