Some Interesting Facts About Coyotes

In the past few years a number of studies have been published and magazine articles written about the “wily coyote.” Here are some of the facts and findings.

First, some basic facts: Coyotes are about the size of a medium-sized dog, about 18-24 inches high at the shoulder and 3 feet long. They weigh between 25 and 40 pounds. They are mostly, but not strictly, nocturnal. They are true omnivores, eating small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects, fruit (including melons and prickly pear tunas) and carrion. Coyotes mate for life. Pups are usually born in April or May.

Coyotes are strictly North American. They used to be limited to the deserts and prairies of Mexico and the central U.S., but have expanded their range to include most all of the US and Canada. There was a recent sighting of one on the rooftop of a bar in Queens, NY!

The Texas population is estimated to be from a low of about 270,000 in March, before pups are born, to a high of about twice that number just after the pups are born. This indicates a high mortality of the young, although once a pup reaches maturity, its lifespan can be as much as 10 to 15 years.

Interestingly, estimates of population densities in Texas indicate that the Hill Country has the lowest population with only about 0.5 coyotes per square mile compared with 6 coyotes per square mile in South Texas.

A long term study of urban coyotes in Chicago that involved radio- and GPS-collars, DNA, and food studies of about 700 coyotes estimated the city population to be 7000 to 8000. The people have been there much longer than the coyotes, so it is not that the people moved into the coyote’s habitat, but that the coyotes moved into Chicago.

This work tells the story of a teenage male that was collared when he was living with his parents. He later dispersed and became part of a pack that established an adjacent territory, then he became the alpha male and helped raise six litters. He was hit by a car 11 years after being first collared.

A female coyote collared in 2000 spent her entire life within about 5 miles of O’Hare Airport, raised seven litters averaging eight pups each and died of natural causes. Her mate was with her the whole time.

The study found that urban coyotes are more strictly nocturnal, have larger litters and a longer lifespan than rural coyotes. Pup survival is 61 percent in Chicago compared to 13 percent in rural Illinois. Vehicles are the main cause of death in the city.

Rodents and/or rabbits are a main source of food for the urban coyotes. Deer (mostly carcasses, not kills) are also a significant portion of the diet. Fruits of all kinds also

make up an important part of their diet. Surprisingly, domestic house cats (or feral cats) and human garbage make up only 1 and 2 percent respectively of urban coyote diets.

During a 16-year period, only 17 cases of attacks on dogs were reported, and most of these were in February, the beginning of the breeding season. There were no reports of coyotes attacking people.

Chicago has a program to remove problem coyotes from an area, and less than 5% of the collared or marked coyotes were ever labeled as “nuisance” animals.

The bottom line seems to be that coyotes can simply learn to live in urban areas without much conflict with people, even in areas where we would conclude there is no suitable habitat for them.

Interestingly, in areas where much hunting and trapping occurs to reduce the coyote population, the coyotes are found to increase their litter size and expand their territories. The U.S. government has spent tens of millions of dollars killing millions of coyotes, but unlike the wolf, they are not extinct and are more widely distributed than ever.

Areas with higher coyote populations are found to have higher bird populations. The explanation being that coyotes are predators of the smaller omnivores such as possums and raccoons, as well as feral cats, plus the fact that feral cats avoid areas with high coyote populations. It turns out that coyotes do not catch many birds themselves.

This all just seems to me to be one more example of us humans not understanding Nature very well. Who would have thought 7000 coyotes would choose to live in Chicago? I wouldn’t.

Until next time…

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