

## The wily coyote

by Elizabeth Jozwiak

The box says Acme Explosives: the target is that pesky roadrunner that zips through the desert canyons with one goal in life to tantalize Wile E. Coyote. In cartoons the coyote is always the victim of his own schemes; he gets bulldozed, blown up, and otherwise clobbered in every episode. In real life however, the tables are turned; it is the coyote that has the brains, the cunning, and the determination to survive.

Coyotes are actually doing quite well across North America. While most other larger carnivores such as the brown bear, wolf, and lynx have declined because of human encroachment and habitat loss, the coyote has adapted to living in the urban and suburban environment.

Prior to the arrival of European settlers, coyotes were found in the central part of the U.S. and in northern Mexico. Today their range extends from Panama to Alaska, including all of the continental U.S. states. The elimination of wolves from much of their historic range in North America has allowed the coyote to move in and increase its population and range with little competition from anyone.

In Alaska coyotes were first noted in the early 1900's. Populations were reported on the mainland of Southeast Alaska, and then slowly expanded northward into the upper Tanana Valley from which they radiated out in all directions. There are fewer coyotes north of the Yukon River. Coyotes probably expanded to the Kenai Peninsula when wolf numbers were extremely low due to predator control efforts in the 1920's -1950's. Coyotes filled the niche the wolf left, and may have reduced or eliminated the Peninsula's red fox population through competition.

However, all that changed when wolves returned and naturally recolonized the Kenai Peninsula in the 1960's. Coyotes continue to exist, but now they share the Peninsula with another (and larger) canid species, which does not tolerate them very well. In most cases, wolves are fiercely protective of their territories, and will kill any coyote they encounter.

Kenai Refuge studies of this rather unique coexistence of wolves and coyotes suggest that there is little direct competition for food resources. From scat analysis we have found coyotes to rely primarily on snowshoe hares, porcupines, small mammals, and road kills,

while wolves preferred moose. Coyotes have also learned to avoid wolf packs because a confrontation usually results in the coyote's death. However, on one occasion several winters ago, as I watched a wolf pack feed on a moose kill, I observed a wary coyote come out of the trees and sneak quick bites of the moose carcass after the wolves retreated into the woods to rest. Studies in Minnesota and Michigan have documented coyotes living on the periphery of wolf packs and scavenging off their kills after the pack leaves the area.

Coyotes living close to human populations are usually safe from wolf encounters. Being true generalists, coyotes can change their diet from natural wild prey to accommodate whatever is available in an urban setting. Most of the time, coyotes go out of their way to avoid humans, but they are discovering that humans are a good source for food. This behavior can sometimes lead to conflicts with humans that own livestock and domestic pets.

Coyotes are opportunistic; they will kill and eat small dogs and house cats, and will even make a meal out of pet food or table scraps that are left outside. If certain precautions are followed, these kinds of encounters with coyotes can be minimized. Not allowing your domestic pets to roam freely and securing your livestock will probably keep a coyote from eyeing your turkey, cat, poodle, or rabbit as its next meal. Keeping your trash containers closed, and pet food in the house or barn will make these resources unavailable to coyotes.

The coyote, being one of the Kenai Peninsula's newest residents, has found its niche on the Peninsula, both within the wilderness of the Kenai Refuge as well as in our backyards. The next time you hear the coyote's high-pitched yips, barks, and howls, think about how this clever coyote has learned to "roll with the punches" and "go with the flow." If only we humans could be so adaptable!

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