

Coyote

Canis latrans

By Jim Pashby



Years ago when driving through Yellowstone National Park for the first time, I passed a coyote sitting near the road. I pulled over and parked. It sat there, 50 yards away, scratching its ear. I'd never seen anything like it in my life.

I'd seen plenty of coyotes before, but always at a distance running full tilt across a field. That's because most everywhere except national parks, coyotes get shot at—by hunters, recreational shooters, and stock-growers. In most of Montana, a vehicle that slows down means only one thing to a wary coyote: Hightail it out of there as fast as possible.

But in Yellowstone, I had the chance to really look at a coyote up close and admire its beauty for the first time.

IDENTIFICATION

Coyotes are members of the Canid, or dog, family, which in Montana also includes gray wolves, swift foxes, red foxes, and domestic dogs. Coyotes have a sharp snout, long pointed ears, and a long bushy tail tipped in black. The fur ranges from grayish buff to brownish gray.

Coyotes are commonly mistaken for wolves, but they are much smaller, averaging just 22 to 28 pounds and 1.5 feet tall at the shoulder, compared to the wolf's 78- to 103-pound average and shoulder height of 2.5 feet. At a distance, with nothing to compare them to, a coyote looks a lot like a wolf, so the misidentification is understandable.

One way to ID a coyote is to watch the animal on the move. "When running, the coyote carries its tail low, nearly between its legs; domestic dogs and wolves allow the tail to ride up," Dr. Kerry Foresman writes in

Jim Pashby is a writer in Helena.

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Canis is Latin for "dog," and *latrans* is Latin for "barking dog." The common name may come from the Aztec word *coyotl*, also meaning "barking dog."

Mammals of Montana. Also, coyotes live statewide while wolves occur only in the state's western half.

HABITAT

Coyotes prefer open plains but can survive in forests and even suburbs and rural subdivisions.

DIET

Coyotes will eat almost anything, including berries, human garbage, birds and their eggs, and reptiles. Meat is their preferred food, and they hunt small mammals ranging from cottontails and jackrabbits to Columbian ground squirrels and marmots. The mid-size carnivores are notorious for preying on lambs, beef calves, deer fawns, and baby elk, though it's sometimes not clear if they have killed the young animal or are scavenging on one that died of starvation, disease, or other causes.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND REPRODUCTION

Coyotes may live in small packs of several individuals, but, unlike wolves, they usually travel alone. A mating pair sticks together while the female nurses the young, which are born in a den located in a cut bank or brushy ravine or under a large deadfall. The

four to seven young are born blind and helpless in late March through April. By three weeks of age, the pups begin leaving the den to explore their surroundings.

HOWLING

Coyotes "yip-howl" at dusk, making a sound that resembles someone screaming in a high-pitched voice. The yip-howl serves as a territorial display warning other coyotes to stay away. And that's just one sound. A single coyote can produce such a wide variety of howls that it can sound like an entire pack.

CONSERVATION STATUS

Coyote are classified in Montana as a "varmint" and can be killed by anyone, without a license, at any time of year. Though coyotes numbers aren't monitored, populations seem to be healthy.

Wolves don't tolerate coyotes, so as wolves were killed off during the early 1900s, coyotes quickly filled the vacuum. In recent years, the recovery of wolves in western Montana may have reduced coyote numbers, though no one is sure. That possible decline may be offset by less mortality from hunting and trapping as coyote fur prices have dropped by more than half in recent years. 🐾