

Coyotes: Rural and Urban

A recent edition of Texas Wildlife magazine contained two articles about coyotes that I found fascinating and informative. Here are, briefly, some of the things discussed in these articles.

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, birds and bird eggs, insects, fruit (including melons and prickly pear tunas) and carrion. Coyotes mate for life. Pups are usually born in April or May.

Wildlife biologist Steve Jester describes the wide fluctuation in coyote population numbers throughout the year, from a low of about 270,000 in the state 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.

In an article by Colleen Schreiber, reprinted from Livestock Weekly, the work of Professor Stanley Gerht was described. This was a long term study of urban coyotes in Chicago that involved radio- and GPS-collars, DNA, and food studies of about 700 coyotes. The Chicago metro area has about nine million people and an estimated 7000 to 8000 coyotes. 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 and is still in the area.

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 while hunting or

shooting is the main cause in rural areas. There is even a video of a coyote looking both ways before crossing a road!

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 have been 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.

Given the lifespan, the litter size and the small territories many of these urban animals live in, their vision of a good habitat must be different than our vision. Likewise, who would have thought that South Texas would have over 10 times the coyote population of the Hill Country? Are more coyotes being hunted or trapped or shot as predators in the Hill Country to cause this difference? Are there that many more food sources in South Texas?

This 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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