

Wild Things in Your Woodlands

Eastern Coyote (*Canis latrans*)



The eastern coyote is larger than coyotes in the west. Adults females average 35-40 pounds, while males typically weigh 45-55 pounds. The coloration of most eastern coyotes is similar to that of a German shepherd, with grey on the back, neck, and upper sides. Some coyotes may be a lighter reddish-blond color, or even solid black. From a distance, coyotes can be distinguished from dogs because they carry their bushy, cylindrical tail outstretched and pointed slightly downward. Coyotes also have yellow eyes, and pointed upright ears. They are much larger than foxes.

Across New York State, summer is the time of year that you are most likely to hear the complex sounds of coyote serenades. At this time, when family units are together, communication occurs through a series of overlapping high, trembling howls combined with a series of short, high-pitched yips. Hearing or seeing a coyote is a thrill indeed.

Once an animal associated with the west, coyotes now live in every state east of the Mississippi River. New York State is home to 20,000 to 30,000 coyotes, occurring everywhere except Long Island and New York City. They commonly inhabit overgrown fields, brushy thickets, and woodlands, and tend to travel trails, dirt roads and habitat edges. Although common in many areas, people rarely see them. Coyotes are usually secretive, avoiding humans by day and becoming more active at nighttime.

Coyotes breed in February and give birth to from 2-10 pups (average 5-6) in April. Larger litters are born when coyote populations are low and food is plentiful. Mothers give birth in a ground den (e.g. renovated woodchuck or fox den), in hollow logs or rock caves. Families stay together until fall or early winter, when the pups leave the family unit.

Coyotes are omnivores and eat just about anything. They are opportunistic, eating whatever is most abundant and easiest to obtain at any given time. Food includes small mammals, rabbits, woodchucks, beaver, insects, berries and other fruit. Coyotes also kill deer, both adults and fawns. However, they seldom prey on healthy adults and mostly feed on deer killed by other means (e.g. automobiles).

Although most coyotes are timid and stay away from people, some animals have lost their fear of humans. Coyotes that frequent highly populated areas are more likely to associate people with food and lose their fear. They do prey on house cats and may attack dogs, particularly as a territorial defense behavior during the breeding season and pup birthing period. Just seeing or hearing coyotes in the woods, fields, and brushy habitats in your area is little cause for alarm. However, a coyote that comes into your yard and refuses to leave even after you bang pots and pans to scare it away is a safety concern. The best thing you can do for coyotes is to do your part to prevent them from associating food with people by keeping garbage, birdseed and pet food safely secured indoors. Keeping pets indoors or under your control, especially at night, can also prevent conflicts.

For more information about coyotes, visit

<http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/coyinny.htm>

Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at ArnotConservation.info

Eastern coyote photo courtesy of

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