

Featured

NATURALLY: The miraculous coyote is important to our ecosystems

- By SARA KING Special to the Gazette
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The resilient coyote evolved more than 10,000 years ago in the American Southwest, and the species is known to frequent White's Woods.

Submitted photo

Our local coyotes have a long history and a promising future! We most often know they are traversing White's Woods by the tracks we find in snow. It is even more common for county residents to know coyotes are near when they hear their frequent barks and songs.

Archeologists confirm that coyotes frequented both Mayan and Aztec cities more than 1,000 years ago. In the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs, coyotes were known as "coyôtl," a word meaning "trickster" or "barking dog."

Coyotes feature in the religions and mythology of Mayans, Aztecs, and a large number of North American Native tribes.

Some Mayan stories depict coyôtl as a divine messenger, carrying maize to the gods so that they could create humans. The Aztec god Huêhuêcôyotl, or "Old Coyote," is a prankster whose tricks often backfire.

In some North American Native traditions, Coyote appears as the creator of the world or, alternatively, of humans. In other traditional Native stories, he is again the trickster, providing life lessons about the ways in which behaviors driven by pride or greed can lead humans into trouble.

This resilient canine has inspired people for centuries and, unlike most larger North American animals, has not only survived, but thrived.

The species evolved more than 10,000 years ago in the American Southwest. When Europeans arrived in North America, coyotes were largely found in the western part of this continent. As the Europeans made their way through America, coyotes did, too. They expanded their range both north and south and by the 1930s began to move into the northeast.

Coyote researchers call this expansion miraculous, noting that only their extraordinary adaptability allowed coyotes to find new ways to live in the midst of the enormous pressure and land changes introduced by humans. The only other mammal that has enlarged their range so extensively, says coyote researcher Dan Flores, is us — human beings.

Coyotes are part of the Canidae family that includes wolves, foxes, jackals, and domestic dogs. Unlike 90% of mammals, coyotes mate for life. Both parents are actively involved in raising the pups, with the coyote father often taking the lead, bringing food to the mother and pups while they are still confined to the den and taking most of the responsibility for feeding and training the pups after they are out and about.

Older siblings sometimes stay around to help raise the pups.

Coyotes are opportunistic eaters. Their diet includes small rodents (mice, voles), rabbits, deer (often scavenged), fruits, plants, and berries. Extensive studies of coyote scat and whiskers by

the Chicago Urban Coyote Research Project across decades make clear that coyotes rarely eat either garbage or domestic cats.

Although coyotes usually hunt singly or in pairs, they live in family groups. These “pack” members, like all family members, communicate with each other. The coyote howls, or songs, cement social bonding and convey pack member location.

Because they are territorial families, coyote density in every geographic area — including urban neighborhoods — stays low. Much lower, in fact, in Cook County, Illinois, than the density of raccoons, deer, or even feral cats.

One surprise for coyote researchers is that these animals almost never kill each other.

Coyotes, unless baited, avoid interaction with people. Decades of research indicate that most U.S. citizens live near and walk by coyotes regularly, without noticing them. The canines are usually, but not always, nocturnal. It is not odd for them to be roaming in daylight, particularly if they are feeding pups.

“Even though it’s true that coyotes are not something to be afraid of,” says the National Park Service, “they are still wild animals and should be treated as such ... remember to always give them respect by keeping a healthy distance.”

Eastern coyotes are genetically different from Western coyotes, in that Eastern coyote genetic history includes remnants from domestic dogs, as well as Eastern and Western wolves.

The “coywolf” or “coydog” notion, coyote researchers emphasize, is misleading. Eastern coyotes are coyotes!

The Eastern coyote is a mid-sized animal. Females weigh around 35 pounds; males are usually about 10 pounds heavier.

Ancient Greeks articulated the argument that it is important to respect and preserve the balance of nature. But Americans have had a hard time remembering this. In 1934, the U.S. Department of Agriculture declared a goal of “the total extermination of the coyote in the United States.” The larger, long-term goal was to eliminate all large predators from our landscape, including grizzly bears, wolves, mountain lions, coyotes and even eagles!

Only the miraculous coyote has thrived. And they remain important to our ecosystems.

Numerous experts provide information about how to live peacefully with coyotes. First and foremost, do not feed them — purposely or accidentally. In the rare event that you notice a coyote in your neighborhood, remove the food source (e.g. birdfeeder, uncovered compost) that is drawing them. Do not create conflict where it doesn’t exist!

Coyote researchers Stanley Gilbert and Kerry Luft are enthralled by the individual personalities of coyotes, as well as their remarkable adaptability. Their hope is that we see coyotes “not with contempt or fear, but with respect, awe, and wonder.”

The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by The Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.