

FIELD GUIDE

Learn to live with coyotes because they're here to stay

By Don Lyman, Globe Correspondent | Updated November 3, 2022, 11:10 a.m.



There may be an increase in coyotes eating human foods in winter because there's less natural food available.
David L. Ryan/GLOBE STAFF FILE

A couple of years ago while walking along a hiking trail on a steep hillside in the Middlesex Fells, I heard a commotion up ahead. It sounded like a large animal running through the dried leaves of the forest floor. I figured maybe I had spooked a deer.

When I rounded the turn in the trail, I was surprised to see a coyote chasing a woodchuck in a rocky area. It looked like a scene from a wildlife documentary, but there it was, in real life, about 30 feet from where I was standing.

The chase only lasted a minute or so, then the woodchuck escaped into its burrow. The coyote continued sniffing around for several minutes, trying to find its lost prey. Eventually, the coyote gave up and just sat for a few more minutes panting and catching its breath before scrambling up the hillside and disappearing into the woods.

I had never seen a coyote in the Fells, and it was quite an exciting experience.

There are an estimated 10,000 to 12,000 coyotes in Massachusetts, said Dave Wattles, black bear and furbearer biologist for the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. They appear everywhere in the state, except Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard.

The first confirmed documentation of coyotes in Massachusetts occurred in the 1950s, according to Wattles.

“By 1980, they were in two-thirds of the state and on the Cape,” said Wattles. “In the ‘90s, they were everywhere.”

This pattern played out in New England and across the eastern United States, Wattles said.

“Coyotes are superabundant animals throughout the US,” said Wattles, “and they have an enormous ability to adapt to a wide variety of habitats and food.”

Wattles said there are large amounts of forest and wetlands in Massachusetts, even in urban areas — cemeteries, golf courses, abandoned lots, strips of forest — knitting together a combination of habitats that coyotes can use. And there's lots of natural habitat in the suburbs.

Coyotes breed in winter, from January to March, and give birth in April or May to anywhere from two to a dozen or so pups, Wattles said. They dig holes in the ground under such protection as rock piles and logs to use as dens where they give birth and raise their pups. It's the only time they truly use a den.

“MassWildlife gets calls in the autumn because the pups are dispersing, and people see more coyotes,” said Wattles.

MassWildlife also gets calls from people when they hear coyotes howling because they are concerned about possible attacks. But howling is just their way of communicating.

“They talk to members of their family group, and to other family groups to let them know they have a territory,” said Wattles. “They're excited when they get together, when they make a kill, and so forth.”

Coyotes mate for life, said Wattles, but will take another mate if their original mate dies. Surprisingly, coyotes only live about 3 to 3½ years in the wild.

Causes of mortality include being killed by people, especially by motor vehicle collisions, said Wattles. Coyotes can be hunted from the fall through March.

“Hunters take about 550 coyotes a year in Massachusetts, which has no impact on the state's population,” said Wattles.

Eastern coyotes resemble medium-sized dogs, but have longer, denser fur and pointed, erect ears, according to [MassWildlife](#). They have long, bushy tails and grizzled gray fur, but color can vary. Females typically weigh 33-40 pounds, males 34-47 pounds. Some weigh over 50 pounds, said Wattles.

“Eastern coyotes have a mix of coyote, wolf, and dog DNA — 65-80 percent western coyote, 10-25 percent wolf, and 8-15 percent domestic dog,” said Wattles.

Coyotes are mostly active at dawn, dusk, and at night, and prey mainly on rodents and small mammals such as mice, voles, woodchucks, and rabbits, said Wattles.

“They’ll also take sick, injured, and abandoned deer fawns in early spring, as well as grasshoppers and crickets in summer,” said Wattles. “Eggs of ground-nesting birds, like wild turkey, are also eaten. And they’ll eat apples and berries in summer and fall.”

Coyotes can take down adult deer, but it’s not common, said Wattles, and likely involves injured or compromised deer, such as animals in deep snow. They often hunt individually, but there are reports of them hunting in small packs of two or more.

Coyotes also feed on human-associated foods such as compost, garbage, and birdseed, said Wattles. There may be an increase in coyotes eating human foods in winter because there’s less natural food available. This summer’s drought probably didn’t affect coyotes, because they eat a variety of foods.

“Coyotes regularly take pets in Massachusetts,” said Wattles. “Fifteen to 25 a year are reported to MassWildlife. But it’s more common than that. A lot of coyote attacks on pets are not reported. It’s almost a daily occurrence in Massachusetts.”

“Keep cats inside,” Wattles advised. “And keep dogs on a leash. You can prevent attacks by being with your dog.”

Wattles said coyote attacks on pets, including large dogs, increase in winter months.

“January, February, and March is coyote breeding season,” said Wattles, “and coyotes may see large dogs as competitors.”

Coyotes occasionally attack people. “Thirty people have been bitten by coyotes in Massachusetts since 1998,” said Wattles.

Many coyote bites are due to people feeding them, or people defending their dogs. “Never feed coyotes or any wildlife,” said Wattles. “People providing food to animals is the main driver for conflict.”

Wattles recommended acting aggressively toward coyotes if you want to scare them away from your yard.

“Come out running and screaming like a crazy person,” he said. “Yell, blow your horn, throw small pebbles and sticks.”

Send your questions about nature and wildlife in the suburbs to donlymannature@gmail.com.

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