



Cody coyote. PHOTO BY JULIE LAWRENCE.

IT IS NOT UNCOMMON during one of our sanctuary education tours to hear visitors exclaim their love of wolves but their disdain for coyotes. Typically the feelings expressed are accompanied by a story about the injury or loss of livestock or a beloved family pet. Who is the coyote, this intelligent wild canine sometimes mistaken for a wolf and one of the most persecuted animals in North America?

Coyotes (*Canis latrans* or barking dog in Latin) have roamed the North American continent for over a half million years. Native American stories passed on from generation to generation frequently have the coyote as the main character in recognition of their intelligence, curiosity and adaptability. The name coyote comes from the ancient Aztecs who called him “coyotl” – “God’s Dog” or “trickster.”

In the pioneer days, coyotes were found mainly in the prairies and brush lands while wolves occupied forested lands. When Europeans arrived in North America and expanded into the west, predators were seen as threats to livestock and as competition with humans for native prey such as deer and elk. In the early 20th century, government supported predator control was institutionalized to create predator free grazing opportunities. A version of this predator control remains with us today. As a result, many species were pushed to the brink of extinction including the wolf. For centuries the coyote cautiously lived on the edge of wolf territory. With the near extinction of wolves in the lower 48 states and the destruction of virgin forests, the adaptive coyote expanded its range. Despite intense persecution, the coyote has not only

Meet the coyote

FEATURE

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survived but learned to live in the complex ecosystems we have created in our backyards, cities, and farms. With the absence of wolves to control their range, we even see coyotes in our forests. Unlike wolves, who are carnivores, coyotes can eat almost anything.

In many states, including Washington, coyotes are treated like vermin and can be hunted year round. Coyote killing contests with prizes are considered entertainment. The research conducted by Dr. Robert Crabtree (Yellowstone Ecosystem Studies) on coyote populations in Washington, California and Wyoming has helped us understand why killing coyotes to manage their numbers and range just doesn't work. Coyotes live in groups where typically only the alpha male and female reproduce. If one of them is killed, disrupting their social structure, surviving females start to have pups, and more pups are born in each litter. Fewer adults able to hunt to feed more pups can actually encourage those adult survivors to eat sheep as an easy meal. Eric Gese, a Wildlife Services researcher, found that after a high percentage of the coyotes in an area of southeastern Colorado were killed, pack size and density rebounded within just eight months.

We now realize the vital role coyotes play in controlling populations of rodents, opossums, jackrabbits and foxes. This in turn protects the grass that cattle eat and ground nesting birds use. As with most environmental challenges we are facing today, it is critical to address the causes of those challenges, rather than try to treat the symptoms through an endless cycle of killing.

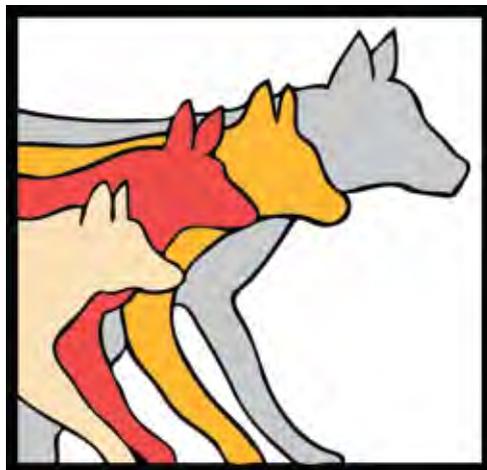
Wolf Haven provides lifetime sanctuary to two coyotes – Cody and Carosal – the only animals in our sanctuary who were born in the wild. As a very young pup, Cody was attacked

by a dog and severely injured. Through the dedicated efforts of For Heaven Sake, a wildlife rehabilitation organization, and Dr. Kim Martin, who performed Cody's surgery, Cody survived but was not a candidate for release back into the wild. Cody lives with the other coyote in our sanctuary, his companion Carosal. They now provide opportunities for our sanctuary guests to learn more about coyotes; how they differ from wolves and ways we can live peacefully with them among us.

Keeping our trash covered, pets in at night and pet food indoors will go a long way toward preventing a problem. We can also encourage our neighbors to do the same. Nonlethal deterrents such as guardian dogs and well maintained fencing are quite effective in preventing problems with livestock. Backyard chicken coops are becoming quite popular in cities that allow them – creating more conflict with wildlife in our cities if not done properly. For more information on living with coyotes, go to the Project Coyote [projectcoyote.org] or The Humane Society of the United States [humanesociety.org/animals/coyotes/]. With a little care, we can live peacefully with coyotes – and reap tremendous benefits. 🐾



Cody recovers from surgery while under the care of now-Board member Dr. Kim Martin. WOLF HAVEN FILE PHOTO.



Size comparison

An easy way to remember general sizes of North American canids: 20 pound increments.

Approximate sizes of:

- Gray wolf: 80 -100 lbs
- Mexican wolf: 60 -80 lbs
- Red wolf: 40 -60 lbs
- Coyote: 20 -40 lbs