



1. What do coyotes look like?

The coyote, *Canis latrans*, is a member of the dog family, similar in appearance to a medium size shepherd. They typically weigh 25-35 pounds, but can weigh up to 55 pounds. They often appear larger than they actually are because of their thick fur. Coyotes have pointed ears and a narrow muzzle. Males tend to be larger than females. Pelts are usually grayish-brown, but occasionally black, often with a patch of white chest hair. Their bushy tail usually has a black tip and is held down between the hind legs when running.

2. What do coyote tracks look like?

Coyote tracks are narrower and more elongated than dog tracks. However, it is very difficult to distinguish coyote tracks from dog tracks because dog tracks vary so much in size. Generally, it is the spacing and pattern of the individual prints that distinguishes a coyote track from a dog track. Coyotes are referred to as "perfect steppers". This means that their front and rear paws land in the same spot when the coyote is traveling in stride.



3. What do coyotes eat?

Coyotes are opportunistic predators and feed on a wide variety of food. A coyote's favorite food items are small mammals, such as rabbits, mice, voles and shrews. Coyotes will also eat birds, frogs, skunks, berries, insects, occasionally beaver, and carrion, especially road-killed deer. Here in the Chicago region it has been found that coyotes have taken advantage of two other abundant food sources: Canada goose eggs and deer fawns.

Coyotes raid the goose nests, taking as many as 20 eggs from a group of nests in a single evening. They then dig caches, or hiding spots, nearby to store the eggs. Coyotes return later to eat the eggs, sometimes as many as three weeks after they were cached.

As deer populations grow in the Chicago region, coyotes have been taking advantage of deer fawns as a food source. Coyotes almost always hunt alone or in pairs, and cannot kill a healthy adult deer. Although coyotes will feed upon the remains of deer, adult deer are usually not killed by coyotes unless injured.

Coyotes, like other wildlife, also take advantage of food that people leave out, such as messy garbage cans, bird seed and even cat and dog food left out for pets. Coyotes will also eat feral and free-roaming cats. The only way to keep your cat safe from coyotes is to keep it indoors.

4. Are coyotes dangerous to people?

Coyotes are rarely dangerous to people. The key to living with coyotes is remembering that they are naturally afraid of people. The most effective way to prevent a bad encounter with a coyote is to reinforce this natural fear through your behavior. If a coyote is seen in its natural habitat, it is fine to watch it from a distance. Coyotes are often seen in neighborhoods near natural areas. Never approach a coyote, let your dog approach it, or feed it. If you are approached by a coyote, or it comes into your yard, scare it away by shouting at it and waving your arms over your head. These actions will reinforce the coyote's natural fear of people and teach it that your yard is not available territory.



If a coyote becomes aggressive, will not be scared away by you, or approaches you aggressively, these are signs that it has lost its fear of people. This is often a result of someone feeding it. If this occurs, the individual coyote may need to be trapped and killed. Another coyote will take its place, but this new coyote will have a fear of people and will not exhibit aggressive behavior.

If you see this type of aggressive behavior in an individual coyote, you should contact Lake County Animal Control at 847-949-9925. There may be an animal control contact number for your municipality. Contact your local town or village hall for this information.

5. Are coyotes dangerous to pets?

Coyotes cannot tell the difference between their natural prey and pets. Therefore, they have been known to occasionally prey on cats. They will only attack another dog if they perceive it to be a threat to their territory, mate, or young. Coyotes view dogs as competition, not as prey. In addition, coyotes, like all dogs, are territorial animals. If an unfamiliar animal enters their territory, a small group of coyotes will often investigate together. This is why people may see three to four adult coyotes approach their dog or horse. *Remember that coyotes are simply curious about you or the animal and are not organizing to hunt.*

Research has shown that the majority of coyotes in this region live in family groups, but some live as lone animals. Family groups work together to bring food back to a nursing mother, and to protect their territory, but they do not hunt in packs like wolves do. A coyote's primary prey is small mammals, and it only takes one coyote, or a pair, to kill a mouse.

Coyotes are protective of their den sites in the early summer and will aggressively chase, or attack, any animal that gets too close to their young. Coyotes, which are dogs themselves, do not think of dogs as prey and usually will not attack a dog for food. However, coyotes do view dogs as competition for territory, food and mates. Coyotes protect their territory just like a dog will protect a yard. Therefore, if a dog, or any animal, enters a coyote's territory, the coyotes will chase it off, or attack it if it won't be chased away. *This can also happen when dogs are walked off-leash in natural areas.* Coyotes are most protective of their territory when they are mating, January through March, and when they have pups, May through June.

6. What can be done to prevent any unwanted contact and protect pets and coyotes?

By keeping dogs on a leash and staying on designated trails, contact with coyotes can generally be avoided. Always supervise your dog closely in areas where coyotes are present, even your backyard. Coyotes are not afraid of your dog, but they are afraid of you. If a coyote approaches your dog, scare away the coyote.

If there are food sources around your house or neighboring houses (e.g. bird feed, untidy garbage cans, food left out for pets), a coyote will take advantage of it when people are not around. These types of food sources are unnatural and will teach the coyote that if it risks coming close to humans it will be rewarded with food. It is very important to keep the area around your house free of these food sources.



7. Have coyotes always been present in Illinois?

The coyote was present in Illinois before European settlers arrived. Their numbers increased when settlers moved to Illinois and the removal of timber began. Journals kept by settlers suggest that coyotes, then referred to as *prairie wolves*, were abundant in Illinois in the early 1800s, but by the mid-1800s their populations were dwindling. This trend was linked to the decrease in prey populations caused by habitat loss and over harvest.

When settlers began raising livestock on Illinois prairies in the mid-1800s, programs were created to eliminate all rivals for range land, including coyotes, bison and wolves. By the late 1800s millions of coyotes had been killed. By the 1950s coyotes were considered rare and programs began to stop their removal. Coyotes started to move across the country filling the niche once filled by cougars and wolves, becoming the top predator. During this time the development of land created edges where rodents and rabbits lived, supplying ample food for the coyote. The coyote, with its adaptable behavior, now lives throughout much of North America, despite decades of persecution by people.

Notes:

- To learn more about coyotes, please read the “Lake County Guide to Coyotes” brochure in the [Forest Preserves Publications](#) section of our website.
- Coyotes that are seen behaving aggressively on District property should be reported to the Ranger Police. To be connected with a ranger, please call the District’s General Offices at 847-367-6640.
- Homeowners groups and other Lake County organizations can book a free informational presentation about coyotes by contacting Allison Frederick at 847-968-3261 or afrederick@LCFPD.org.

