

# Coyote

(*Canis latrans*)

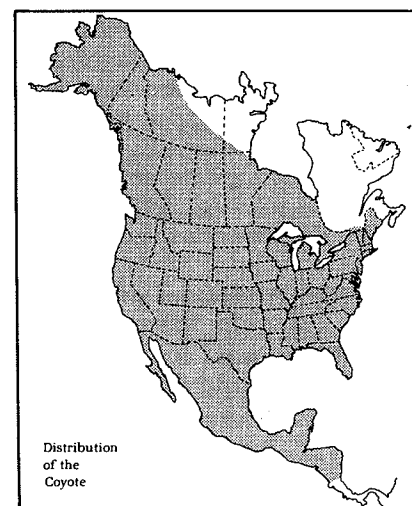


This animal's common name is from the Aztec Indian word *coyotl* and preferably should be pronounced in the Mexican Spanish version "ki-o-tee" rather than in the corrupted form "ki-ot."

**Description.** The coyote is extremely doglike; of the various domestic breeds, it most closely resembles a small German shepherd. It is easily distinguished from red and

gray foxes by its larger size, coloration, shorter tail and round pupil of the eye (the foxes having vertical eye pupils).

Typically, the upper parts are light gray to dull yellow with the outer hairs broadly tipped with black; considerable variation does occur, ranging from nearly black to nearly white. The length varies from 39½-54 inches (1,003-1,371 mm); extremes in adult weight are 18 and 48 pounds (8.1 and 21.7 kg).



This series is abstracted from the revised edition of *The Wild Mammals of Missouri* by Charles and Elizabeth Schwartz. For more detailed information about this species and other mammals in Missouri, refer to this book. Your school library may have it or can borrow it for you from the inter-library loan service. This book can be purchased from the University of Missouri Press, P.O. Box 1644, Columbia, MO 65211, or the Missouri Department of Conservation, P.O. Box 180, Jefferson City, MO 65102.

## Missouri Mammals

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### Distribution and abundance.

The range of the coyote includes most of North America. The coyote occurs throughout the state, being most abundant in the Prairie Region of northern and western Missouri.

This species has been increasing in recent years, partially due to its adaptability and aggressive nature. As the red fox decreased, coyotes filled the vacant range; they also were able to dominate the less aggressive gray fox.

**Habitat and home.** Coyotes live in brushy country, along the edge of timber and in open farmland. During most of the year, they have no home site and merely sleep on the ground in some concealed, protected spot. In the breeding season, however, the female provides a den for her young.

The den is usually located in an unused field and is often close to timber. Frequently the female remodels a burrow formerly used by a fox, skunk, woodchuck or badger, although sometimes she digs her own den in loose soil.

**Habits.** A coyote may live in an area as small as 3-4 miles (4.8-6.4 km) in diameter when the young are being fed, or as large as 25-30 miles (40-48 km) in diameter during the rest of the year. Coyotes are mostly nocturnal but may be active in the daytime too. They can run 45 miles (72 km) per hour for short distances. Water is no barrier to their travel as they swim well. Coyotes seem to enjoy outwitting other animals, and adults are even playful on occasion.

**Foods.** A study of the foods of 770 coyotes from Missouri showed the following major food groups and their percentages by volume: rabbits 53.7; mice and rats 8.7; other wild

mammals 7.5; livestock 8.9; poultry 11.3; wild birds 0.5; known carrion 5.8; insects. 0.8; plants 2.0; and miscellaneous 0.8. It is difficult to evaluate accurately the coyote's food habits, because it is often impossible to tell whether the food item was secured as a kill or eaten as carrion. From 10 to 20 percent of the total foods of the coyote probably constitutes a financial loss to man; the remainder is neutral or beneficial.

**Reproduction.** Most mating occurs in late February or early March and pregnancy lasts 58-63 days. Two to 19, but usually five to seven, young are born in late April or May. The pups are blind and helpless at birth and are covered with brownish-gray woolly fur. Their eyes open between 8 and 14 days of age. Coyote pups can be distinguished from fox pups by the shape of the eye pupil; the pupils are round in coyote pups, vertically elliptical in both red and gray fox pups. The young come out of the den for the first time when about 3 weeks old. The parents teach their pups to hunt when they are between 8 and 12 weeks old. The family disperses in the fall.

**Importance.** Although coyotes kill some livestock and poultry, they often are blamed unjustly for the large amount of damage done to domestic stock by free-running dogs. From the studies of stomach contents of coyotes in Missouri and elsewhere, it is believed that depredations on livestock and poultry are the work of certain individuals comprising about one-fourth of the coyote population.

Because cottontail rabbits form a large part of the coyote's diet, many hunters consider the coyote detrimental to their sporting interests. The take of cottontails by coyotes, however, has not been shown to



Coyote pup has round eye pupil distinguishing it from fox pup with spindle-shaped pupil

lower the rabbit population.

Aside from any conflict with man, the coyote is a valuable member of the wildlife community. It feeds on rodents and thus helps prevent the damage these abundant, undesirable animals might otherwise cause to crops. It kills and eats old, sick, or injured wild animals unfit to survive. As a scavenger on dead animals, both wild and domestic, it helps clean up the woods and fields. Coyote pelts are used to a limited extent for trimming coats and for scarfs.

**Management.** Because certain coyotes develop a habit of damaging livestock and poultry, control should be directed toward these particular troublemakers. Using an intensive trapping program, it is possible to greatly reduce the losses caused by these particular coyotes. In certain parts of the United States in the past, coyote populations have been checked by poisoning campaigns, but this method has limitations because it destroys other animals such as valuable pets, livestock, furbearers and other wild animals which cause no harm. The number of coyotes presented for bounty payments is too small to reduce the population or to curtail damage complaints and has proved too expensive to justify economically.

Coyote tracks

