Love Wolves and Hate Coyotes?

A Conundrum for Canid Enthusiasts

by JONATHAN WAY

OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS wolves have gained an almost mythical status among many wildlife enthusiasts, probably more than any other animal currently enjoys. What is intriguing is that the wolf's smaller cousin, the coyote, does not enjoy the same favorable viewpoint. Let's explore some potential reasons why.

Biology and Ecology

Coyotes are a lot like wolves. They are territorial, social pack animals (although the coyote's average pack size is often smaller). Lone coyotes, just like lone wolves, are often young dispersing animals not associated with a pack. These animals are simply trying to establish a territory of their own, often many miles from where they were born. Coyotes range in size from 18 to 30 pounds (8 to 13 kilograms) for the western variety (gener-

Photos— Wolf (above): International Wolf Center; All Coyotes: Jonathan Way

ally Ohio west) to 30 to 50 pounds (13 to 22 kilograms) for eastern coyotes.

One major difference between the two canids is that wolves generally do not live in human-dominated areas (although there are exceptions like in Romania) while coyotes do. Coyotes in urbanized areas generally behave similar to coyotes in less urbanized environments. They are both social and live in stable packs; have a mostly natural diet (e.g., fruits, rodents, rabbits and deer fawns); preferentially reside in more natural (i.e., wooded) areas of their heavily urban ranges; and guard their living area from conspecifics, making them territorial. Despite being similar to wolves, coyotes generally have three major differences: they typically eat smaller prey than wolves, which mostly rely on large ungulates; they have territories that are about one-tenth as large; and an enduring trait of coyotes is that they rarely kill each other over territorial intrusions, which is one of the most common causes of wolf deaths in populations not hunted.

Positive Ecological Attributes

The recent literature is rife with accounts documenting the importance of predators, including coyotes, on the landscape. For example, it has been shown that the presence of coyotes can promote a higher number of songbirds by reducing domestic cat predation on birds. In addition, coyotes can promote higher diversity of species (e.g., songbirds and rodents) by decreasing the abundance of smaller meso-predators such as skunks, foxes and domestic cats through direct killing or avoidance. Urban coyotes can also reduce overabundant Canada geese populations in some metropolitan areas and possibly populations of white-tailed deer. The presence of coyotes could even benefit preferred game species such as waterfowl and sage grouse by reducing fox numbers. Thus, coyotes can bring important, positive ecological effects, especially in urban areas where coyotes are the dominant carnivore and function as a top-order predator.

Legal Killing Methods

Despite the positive ecological aspects associated with coyotes, 42 of 49 (86%) U.S. states allow unlimited take, which means there is no closed season, and bag limits per hunter are unlimited, suggesting that coyotes have little to no value or that limitless take is simply an outgrowth of past eradication efforts and old-school predator management. Hunters can use a variety of techniques such as poison (in some instances), traps, snares, baiting, night hunting and predator calls. Many of these methods of hunting and killing (e.g., traps and baiting) are not favored by a large majority of the U.S. public. In addition, taxpayer money is used to kill 80,000 so-called problem coyotes per year, largely in the West. Aerial hunting kills about 30,000 of these. By some accounts, more money is spent killing coyotes than the value of the actual damage they cause. In essence, coyotes have been shot, trapped, poisoned, snared, killed with coyote "getters" laced with poison and tortured for centuries. But where is the public outcry and the lawsuits to prevent this?

Regardless of these lax hunting regulations, coyotes have expanded their range. Herein lies the conundrum: Coyotes are expanding their range to all reaches of North America, yet they are vilified by state fish and game agencies in charge of protecting them.

Many wildlife advocates bemoan the recently implemented wolf seasons in the three Northern Rocky Mountain states that include trapping, hunting over bait, soon-to-be liberal bag limits and no closed season in parts of

Wyoming, but these techniques (and then some) are currently allowed with coyotes in the vast majority of the country. It is a literal legal slaughter, and the majority of the public does not seem to care, or at the least not enough to do anything about it. Why?

State wildlife departments support these slaughters, arguing that the animal won't go extinct. However, that potentially ignores the biological and ecological importance of coyotes as well as the ethical and humane concerns associated with slaughtering a species.

Taxonomy

Interestingly enough, the eastern coyote has native eastern wolf genes in its DNA makeup (see "Eastern Coyote: Coyote, Wolf, or Hybrid?" *International Wolf* Fall 2008), and according to published research, these coyotes could be called "coywolves" due to their intermediate morphology and genetic profile. Many of the coyotes moving from the Great Lakes area to the Mid-Atlantic region possess wolf genes as well, but to a lesser extent than coywolves. However, all of these hybrid animals are simply called coyotes. Few states protect them, almost seemingly because of their name. Western states allow open, year-round seasons, while some states that have a regulated season (like Massachusetts) allow hunters to use bait and to hunt from their houses and have a long (almost half-year) hunting season with no bag limits.

Regardless of canid genetics, all coyotes are in the same family (Canidae) and genus (*Canis*) as wolves and could simply be thought as of as little wolves.

Why Less Respect?

Coyotes are more common than wolves, even though wolf populations have increased greatly in the past 30 years. Coyotes also live in urbanized areas and prey on pets and livestock so are often viewed as a direct threat to more people. This is in contrast to wolves, which a portion of the U.S. public views as a romantic novelty that lives in some far-off wilderness that few visit. As Frank Vincenti of the Wild Dog Foundation said, "Americans are naturally drawn to big, charismatic, fallen heroes like wolves and bears, but coyotes are relegated to being small, sneaky, cowardly and untrustworthy."

In parts of the country, however, wolves are despised, feared and treated as a threat to a way of life. Proposals for hunting go beyond normal means and include some of the unfavorable methods used to take coyotes, such as baiting and trapping.

Wolves became a poster child for the Endangered Species Act in the 1970s and thus became federally protected. Now that some studies have documented positive impacts wolves have on landscapes, wolves have become the iconic animal associated with wilderness and ecosystem restoration, and this viewpoint remains

despite some scientific controversy about the actual level of influence wolves have had on the landscape. In contrast, coyotes have always been managed by states that are typically more hostile to predatory species. And despite some pretty torturous treatment, coyotes manage to survive and outwit even the most determined attempts to eradicate them. This animal is simply viewed by many people as a pest or vermin, something undesirable to be disposed of.

What Can Be Done?

As a biologist studying this creature, I see an incredibly adaptable and family-oriented animal that is personable, social, and sentient and an important member of the ecological community. I have a moral and ethical problem with how most states treat them as vermin, especially since only a minority of people hunt, and wildlife watching is now a considerably larger component of the economy. Just because coyotes can reproduce quickly does not mean they do not have feelings when they lose a mate, for instance. I think these social, intelligent animals feel loss. Accordingly, I strongly believe all states should have strict bag limits and seasons and consider banning some of the least favorable hunting methods such as baiting. Treating coyotes otherwise sends the wrong message as to their value both ecologically and aesthetically.

While many national environmental groups such as Defenders of Wildlife and National Wildlife Federation have long supported recovered wolf populations, an upsurge in the "common species novelty" is occurring. Organizations such as Project Coyote, Wild Earth Guardians, Predator Defense Institute, Eastern Coyote Research (my organization), Wild Dog Foundation, Massachusetts Coyote Alliance and Coyote Watch (Canada) among others focus on and view coyotes in a positive light and try to help foster coexistence between coyotes and humans. I hope the public will soon realize that coyotes are just as important as other more novel animals like the wolf. Certainly, range and population-wise, they have a larger collective ecological impact than wolves.

Some things that can be done to improve the coyote's image are: document and refer to studies that indicate their ecological importance; afford the animal more protections through lobbying and/or ballot initiatives; and discuss their social, family-oriented nature with lawmakers and other stakeholders associated with wildlife management. While some of this has been done, it has not been systematically conducted and has definitely not been incorporated into state management plans.

It might be necessary to craft some kind of federal canid or predator protection act that establishes baseline protections for all canids (or all predators), animals believed by many to be disproportionately important members of ecological communities yet essentially managed by hunting and trapping interests at the state level. This law could grant exceptions to protection (on private land, for instance), but it would recognize that other stakeholders now associated with wildlife have had essentially no say in management. Given the relative lack of danger posed by coyotes living near people versus the ecological services they could provide, these thoughts should not be ignored.

In theory, leaving territorial adult coyotes alone could help naturally regulate populations and promote long-term coexistence with humans, especially when humans modify their behavior (e.g., not leaving food outside, keeping cats inside and leashing dogs) to prevent confrontations. This would encourage coyotes to forage for natural food and allow the general public to enjoy coexisting with this pretty cool canid. ■

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With Elk and Wolves, Someone is Fibbing

by TODD WILKINSON

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The following article first appeared in the* Bozeman Daily Chronicle *on May 19, 2012, and is reprinted here with permission.*

Nearly a decade ago, I wrote a column about the doomsday predictions of Robert T. Fanning, Jr., then chairman of a wolf-loathing group called Friends of the Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd.

Shortly after the new millennium began, Mr. Fanning made several bold statements. "The Yellowstone ecosystem has become a biological desert…a wasteland," he said. "We predict that the largest migrating elk herd on Earth will be completely extinct in three years. We predict that entire communities in Montana will vanish because no one spoke up for social justice for the people who were forced to live with wolves."

When three years passed and there were still elk in the Yellowstone region, millions of tourists still coming to spend huge sums of money watching wildlife of all kinds in the national parks, and human settlements in Montana still intact, the absurdities didn't go away.

Mr. Fanning certainly didn't either; in 2012, he ran unsuccessfully for governor of Montana as a Republican on an anti-wolf platform. He finished in the back of a pack of primary election contenders.

As we all know, the perception that wolves are "decimating" wildlife, especially elk, is rife on AM radio airwaves. We hear it stated as fact by outfitters and guides at public meetings, and invoked by governors in Wyoming, Montana and Idaho as justification for killing lots of lobos.

Wyoming Gov. Matt Mead in his 2012 state of the state address said wolves were a threat to outfitters. If it's true—this claim of wolf-caused wapiti Armageddon—then it sure doesn't align with what outfitters and guides are telling clients on their websites.

I've spent several days reading 60 different outfitter Internet sites up and down the Rockies, from the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming to the Canadian border. Not a single proprietor of guided hunts mentions anything remotely suggesting that wolves are annihilating elk herds or jeopardizing the quality of hunts.

Quite the contrary: Many outfitters making their living in the heart of wolf country would have clients believe that elk hunting is as good as it's ever been. Indeed, state wildlife statistics show that, overall, elk numbers have, in general, never been higher in modern times.

In Internet pitches to customers, outfitters tout high hunter success rates, healthy herds, glowing levels of client satisfaction, and plenty of return business, which means if elk hunters weren't bagging wapiti they wouldn't be coming back.

Nowhere, not on any official outfitter webpage or brochure, is there a caveat emptor warning high-paying clients that wolves are destroying hunting. Gallery photos abound showing smiling clients sitting next to massive elk harvested last season.

So who are we to believe—the outfitters who insist wolves have ruined elk herds or the very same outfitters selling "elk hunting trips of a lifetime"?

Consider this pronouncement from a well-known Jackson Hole, Wyoming, hunting purveyor that guides near the southeast corner of Yellowstone: "Our area produces not only some of the largest trophies taken each year in Wyoming, but often records the highest harvest percentage for elk in the state."

Or this statement from a different Teton County, Wyoming, outfitter operating in the same general area. "Great 2011 hunting season—28 bulls killed!" he boasted on his website. "We usually have one of the highest success rates in the Jackson Hole area!"


David Kick

Or this from an outfitter in Bondurant, Wyoming: "With tremendous numbers of animals our success rates have been near 100 percent the past five years."

Or this from a guiding outfit in the Frank Church Wilderness of Idaho, where wolves have reportedly "wiped out" all the elk necessitating draconian wolf control: "Most of our [elk] hunters are satisfied, repeat customers, and they're our best advertisement."

Or this from hunting guides in Paradise Valley, Montana, just beyond the north boundary of Yellowstone: "High opportunity for trophy class elk" and "extremely high client return rate ten years straight."

Or this from backcountry specialists in Cody, Wyoming, who guide on the Shoshone and Bridger-Teton national forests: "Last year 29 out of 30 clients shot an elk (97 percent). Bottom line, hunter success is so good because there are so many elk in our area."

I could go on and on and on with good news from backcountry camps—with guides and outfitters bragging of how great the hunting is in *their own words*. And when I do I think of Shakespeare in Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 4, in which the bard makes reference to characters hanging themselves by their own petard.

When Gov. Mead and county commissioners in the three states say the wolf population needs to be aggressively controlled because it's a "threat" to outfitters, what exactly do they mean?

They ought to spend some time reading outfitter websites. One way or another, someone's not being honest. Either clients are being fibbed to and therefore, outfitters are engaging in false advertising, or the public is being misled with declarations of elk apocalypse. Which is it? ■

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