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COYOTES: A HUNTER'S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The challenge and thrill of recreational hunting for coyotes (*Canis latrans*) has increased greatly over the last 20 years. The popularity of calling coyotes especially is increasing east of the Mississippi River as coyote populations continue to increase their range and abundance in that area.

David had his Goliath, Don Quixote had his windmills and Willy Loman had his dreams. Each had an adversary that represented a challenge to overcome or conquer. I'm not sure what the connection is to coyotes, but it seemed like a good way to start. I hope that I can weave these thoughts together as we go along, so you won't think I'm a total idiot.

Increasingly over the last 8-10 years, the coyote has become that adversary or challenge to many of today's hunters. To get a good perspective on today's hunter, let's look for a moment at yesterday's opportunities to hunt the cunning canine.

Range expansion of coyotes

The coyote, having started his trek a few hundred years ago into what we know as North America, has not occupied his present range for very long. Natural barriers forced the coyote's migration up and over the large rivers that ultimately form the Mississippi.

Archeology has shown us that coyotes roamed the far eastern edge of the Canadian Provinces over 400 years ago. For some unexplained reason, their range retracted to a more western domain. Small numbers of them filtered down the northeastern edge of the continental U.S. But it wasn't until we abandoned the river crossing ferry method for bridges that the eastern states were opened up to the coyote's migration eastward. Helped along by the transplantation of small numbers of coyotes by houndsmen who wanted sport for their dogs, coyote numbers started to grow east of the Mississippi River.

Not being considered a game animal, the coyote was not managed like deer or turkey. The tremendous benefit of hunting as a management

tool in the conservation effort was not applied to the coyote. They managed to do quite well on their own. They certainly were not in any trouble heading towards endangerment.

Coyote populations increase

The only factor in this area to regulate coyote numbers was basically the recreational fur trapper. Coyote fur was in high demand during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the trapper was the vehicle that supplied it. Then came the reduced demand for fur in 1988-89, and subsequently the collapse of the fur trapping industry. The fur market still hasn't recovered, thus fur demand may never again cause it to be a viable management tool for controlling coyote populations.

Coyote populations left unchecked grew rapidly. Their numbers have now grown to the point where disease and starvation will put the clamps on their advance in some areas. Left unchecked, coyotes continued to become more abundant in states where before they were known to occur, but were only rarely seen. Today they are being seen with regularity.

What initially was a neat thrill for some hunters, i.e., to see a coyote passing by the deer stand became a concern for the coyote's effect on small game. Even worse was the fear that fawns and turkey poults would also be affected.

It is at this point that the challenge to call in a coyote and shoot him started its meteoric rise. Paralleling this interest on the part of deer and turkey hunters was the effort of State Game Departments to encourage the sport hunting of coyotes. The effective tool of trapping was gone so now the states need help from hunters.

The state of South Dakota developed a program of tagging and releasing coyotes with bounty tags of up to \$500 to be redeemed by the lucky hunter that was able to get him. Restrictions on hunting coyotes in several eastern states started dropping like flies.

Hunter interest rising

What once was the coveted enjoyment of hearing the serenading harmony of the "song dog" has now become the call to battle. I think of the villagers with their torches storming Dr. Frankenstein's castle when I hear some hunters talk about coyotes. I've done seminars in the east where some in the audience sat fixed on my Wyman Meinzer coyote photographs with a lusting stare mumbling "gotta get one ... gotta get one".

You're probably wondering why I keep referring to "eastern this and eastern that." It's because I believe there is demand and a desire that is as yet untapped. There may be an opportunity that has not been seized upon. Please understand that the opportunity to hunt coyotes may not be a big deal to many long time hunters in Texas; but it is to others.

Hunters from the East who have moved into our state are one segment, along with other Texans who have concentrated on deer, turkey, quail or doves all their life. They are just now discovering the thrill of coyote hunting. Combine them with nonresident coyote hunters and it's probably a sizeable group of hunters. Maybe the coyote can be managed as a cash crop just as the deer and the turkey have been. It's happening with feral hogs. Maybe it can with coyotes also.

I believe it was outdoor writer Larry Weishuhn who coined the phrase "Poor Man's Grizzly" when referring to a feral hog boar. I assume using the word "grizzly" alludes to the element of danger and adventure involved while at a minimal investment of dollars.

Considering the coyote's sharp instincts and intelligence, the lure to hunt them is the bragging rights to say you were able to win or overcome the challenge. I talk to hunters all over the country that salivate at the thought of hunting our abundance of coyotes. They have had their appetite whetted by calling in their own states, but they dream of hunting on a Texas ranch with lots of coyotes. The coyote is to the northern and eastern hunter what the feral hog

is to the southern and western hunter. There just aren't the numbers there to satisfy all of the desire. I've talked to many hunters who have traveled west for an opportunity to hunt coyotes. They are freely spending their hard-earned vacation money doing it.

During a seminar at a "Bowhunters University" weekend retreat, I asked how many, out of the 25 hunter present, had harvested deer with their bows. Eighteen or so raised their hand. I then asked how many had seen a coyote while bowhunting; 6-8 hands shot up. When asked how many had been able to shoot the coyote, only 2 hunters raised their hands. When I asked if the coyote had been called up only 1 responded. I then asked how many would like to call 1 up and take him, and virtually every hand shot back up.

Appeal of hunting coyotes

Occasionally I agree to spend a day or 2 with an out of state hunter who takes vacation time to come hunt for coyotes. Poor Mama and kids sit in the motel while Daddy gets his thrill in the woods hunting coyotes. Even if we strike out, he goes away giddy at the opportunity to hunt Texas coyotes.

One of the appeals of coyote hunting is the wide diversity of calling and hunting techniques. Day or night, almost any type of terrain and smart ones vs. dumb ones are all elements that come into play. For those in Texas who have called a great deal, they might shrug their shoulders and say "what challenge"? But to someone who hasn't had the opportunities we have, they feel they may have conquered the world.

One hunter from the east coast who has called them successfully at home experienced his first ever night-calling on one of my trips. He was almost wetting his pants at the sight of those eyes popping out of the darkness.

I've had several hunting guides relate to me that some of their clients would almost rather hunt coyotes than deer. More than one hunter who has hunted big game all over the world has stated emphatically "that [calling coyotes] was the most fun I've ever had hunting" after a successful day in the Texas brush.

What creates this excitement? I believe it is the intensity of the anticipation that builds as the hunter

waits impatiently. Understanding the coyote's extremely keen senses and ability to survive, the challenge to outwit the worthy adversary presses firmly on the hunter's consciousness. The coyote can burst onto the scene in a dead run, or it can sneak in silently only to appear out of nowhere. If you are skilled (or maybe just lucky!) enough to get one into rifle, handgun or bow range, then the real challenge begins. To get him in your sights without him detecting your movement, scent or sound will set apart the men from the boys so to speak.

Coyote calling can be a type of hunting that provides an incredible diversity in action, reaction and results. Styles and beliefs can vary widely among experienced hunters but I think they all will agree that coyote hunting can be a tremendously fun challenge for anyone

The coyote to some has taken on a mystical proportion like David's Goliath. When they are able to place that perfect shot they have slain the obstacle to them winning the challenge. Some will pursue the coyote because he is perceived as the evil dragon, when in reality he is just another part of the landscape.

Well, I haven't figured out how to work Don Quixote and Willy Loman into this yet, but there's a connection there somewhere. But that will have to wait until another day.