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COYOTE (*Canis latrans*)

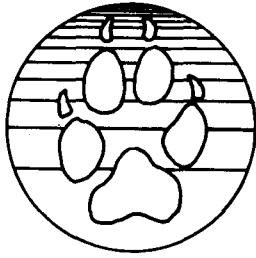
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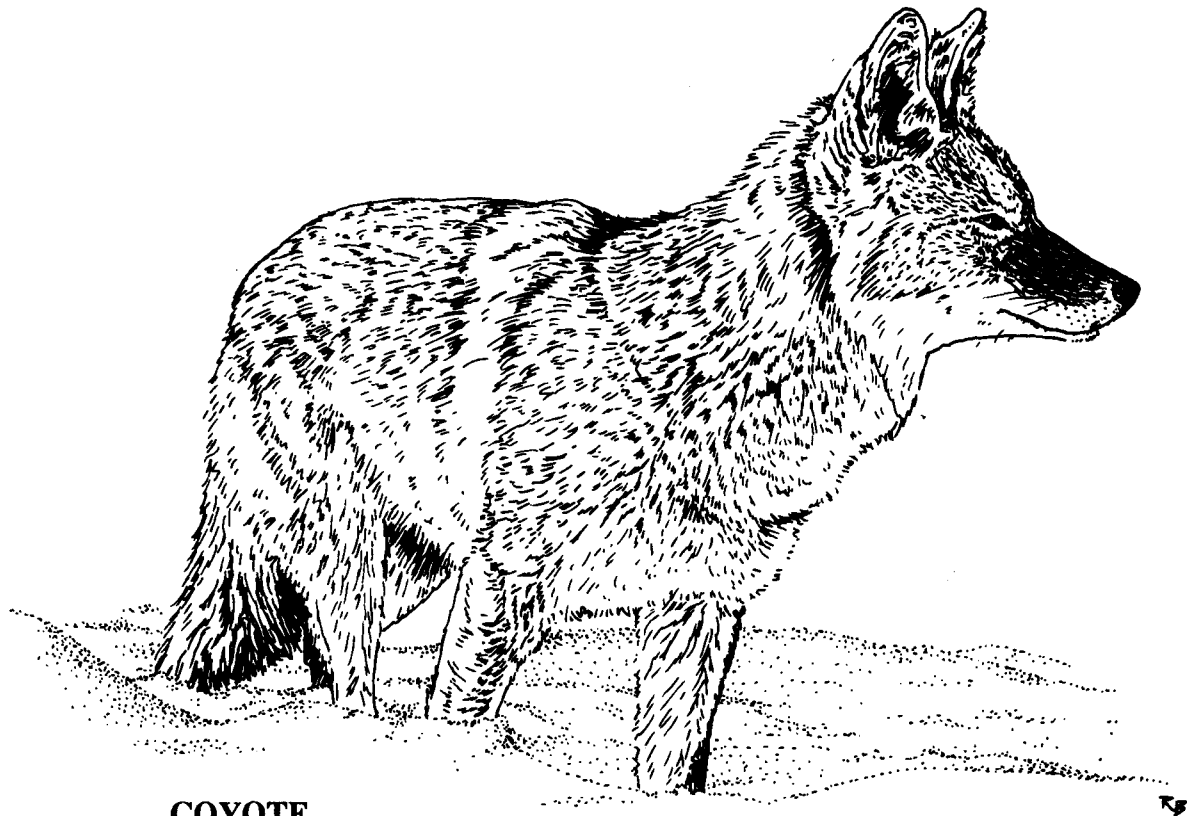
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NEBRASKA WILDLIFE

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission



COYOTE
(*Canis latrans*)

Description: The coyote's name is derived from the Aztec word "coyotl". It is a member of the dog family (canids) which includes wolves, dogs and foxes, and resembles a small German Shepherd. Adults coyotes weigh an average of 20 to 35 pounds, with males being about 4 pounds heavier than females. Coyotes weighing over 50 pounds are more common in the northern and northeastern portions of their range than elsewhere. An adult coyote is four to five feet long from the tip of its nose to the tip of its tail.

In Nebraska, coyote pelts show a great variety of color and texture. Eastern Nebraska coyotes generally have a coarse coat that is brownish gray to buff in color, while coyotes from the Sandhills and Panhandle are much lighter gray with dense, soft underfur.

Coyote tracks are more elongated than dog tracks and are about 1½ times as long as they are wide. Coyotes have bushy black-tipped tails, broad, pointed, erect ears and yellow eyes. They have relatively large brains, and exceptional senses of smell, sight and hearing.

Although coyotes avoid wolves and dogs under normal conditions, they occasionally mate with them and create hybrid offspring that are usually larger than a typical coyote. This usually happens where wolf densities are low or on the edge of the coyote's range.

Distribution and abundance: During the early 1800's, coyotes were limited to the Great Plains and western regions of North America. Since then, they have expanded their range north and east. This is primarily the result of the eradication of wolves by humans and the coyote's ability to adapt to various habitats, including living very close to human populations.

Coyotes in New England have hybridized with gray wolves and are generally larger than western coyotes. Range expansion in the southeastern United States has been aided by translocation for sport hunting.

Coyotes are generally more abundant in the Southwest and Midwest than in other regions of North America. In Nebraska, coyotes are more abundant in western Nebraska and the

Sandhills, regions where ranching predominates over crop farming.

Habitat and home: Coyotes are extremely adaptable and live in a wide variety of vegetative types, from grassland to northern boreal forest. Almost any area that supports good populations of small prey will support coyotes. As prey abundance increases, coyote abundance generally increases.

Coyotes require a minimum of shelter during most of the year. They usually simply curl up in a concealed, protected spot, though they do use dens for whelping and rearing pups. A coyote seldom digs its own den, instead, it uses natural cavities or modifies abandoned woodchuck or badger dens. The female coyote usually selects several den sites in concealed locations and moves her litter if she is disturbed in one location.



Hind track
2¼" long



Front track
2½" long

Habits: The coyote is perhaps the most vocal mammal in Nebraska. Its howling and yipping serves to communicate with family members and to notify neighboring coyotes of its presence in the area. Numerous displays and postures are used to show antagonism, dominance and greetings.

Coyote densities have been reported as high as five animals per square mile in the southwestern United States, but are more likely to be one to two per square mile in Nebraska. Both parents help care for young and may mate for life. Home ranges are usually occupied by mated pairs although the male may move more extensively than the female. Coyotes are known to form packs consisting of the adult pair and young from more than one generation, although this seldom occurs in Nebraska. The size of the coyote's range depends on population density and varies between eight and 12 square miles. Where coyotes are numerous, their home ranges are small. A mated pair defends its home range from adjacent pairs but is somewhat tolerant of unmated transient coyotes that pass through the range. Unmated transient coyotes move great distances and comprise up to 20 percent of the total coyote population. A coyote marks his territory with scent by depositing droppings and urine on the perimeter of the area.

Coyotes may be active and observed throughout the day, but are most active at dusk and dawn. The daytime activity increases during breeding and pup rearing. Coyotes hunt in areas where small prey are likely to occur. They rely on sight, smell and sound to locate prey. Rabbits are typically flushed from cover and chased down and mice are usually caught by the coyote pouncing upon them with its front feet.

Foods: Coyotes are opportunistic carnivores and take advantage of seasonal changes in the abundance of food items. Rabbits, deer fawns, various plants and assorted birds and invertebrates are important summer food. Their winter diet emphasizes larger prey, such as deer (prey or carrion), livestock carrion, rabbits and hares. Occasionally, an individual coyote learns that sheep, lambs and calves are easy prey.

Reproduction: Coyotes reproduce once a year. Pairs are formed and breeding occurs in January-February. Coyotes are capable of breeding at one year of age but do so infrequently. Most are two years old when they breed for the first time. The percentage of females that breed is dependent on food availability and coyote density. Pups are born nine weeks after breeding occurs. The litter size depends on the age of the mother and the amount of available prey in the area. A scarcity of prey results in fewer females breeding and producing smaller litters. There are usually four to seven pups in a litter under average conditions. The pups join parents on hunting trips when they reach eight to 10 weeks of age and they begin to disperse in the fall, but some pups may not leave the family group for up to two years. When a pup leaves the family group it usually relocates within five to 10 miles, but records show some have traveled in excess of 300 miles.

Mortality: As many as 50 to 70 percent of all juvenile coyotes die before they reach adulthood. Those that become adults typically live three to five years, and 30 to 50 percent of the adult population dies each year. Under most conditions, human-related causes, including hunting, trapping and vehicle collisions are responsible for most coyote mortality. Coyotes compensate for that heavy harvest by breeding at younger ages and having larger litters. More one-year-old females breed during periods of heavy harvest and their litter size can rise to as many as 17 pups.

Sarcopic mange occurs in coyote populations throughout Nebraska. Mange outbreaks occasionally become severe and can seriously reduce coyote populations over large areas for a number of years. Other important diseases and parasites that affect coyotes include canine distemper, canine hepatitis and heartworm. Surprisingly, rabies is not an important disease in coyotes, although they are susceptible to that disease.

Importance: Several million dollars worth of livestock losses are annually attributed to coyote depredation nationwide and several million dollars are spent trying to control those losses. In Nebraska, the coyote is among the top three wildlife species that are responsible for depredation complaints. Livestock losses are predominantly for sheep and young calves. Attempts to control losses involve short-term coyote population reduction and the removal of offending individuals by shooting, trapping, or poisoning. Poisoning must be done only by trained professionals. Changes in animal husbandry practices have proven effective in reducing losses to coyotes.

As Nebraska's dominant terrestrial predator, coyotes can influence the abundance of their competitors. The abundance of coyotes is inversely related to the abundance of red foxes and bobcats. When coyote numbers increase, fox and bobcat numbers decrease and when coyote numbers decrease, fox and bobcat numbers can increase.

The coyote is an extremely cunning animal that provides thousands of days of hunting and trapping recreation each year. From 1941-89, 540,000 coyotes were harvested by fur trappers and hunters. Harvest totals 1980-89 indicated an average annual harvest of 20,900 coyotes, their pelts valued at \$521,000.

The call of the coyote has long been associated with life on the Great Plains. This versatile animal has survived and thrived under persecution and major changes in its habitat.

