



## Eastern Coyote in New Jersey

### **Natural History**

In the last 30 years sightings of eastern coyotes have increased along much of the eastern seaboard, including New Jersey. This increase is due to the coyote's ability to co-exist successfully with people and their ability to adapt to more varied habitat types and food sources.

Historically, the coyote is not native to New Jersey. The coyote extended its range north and east across Canada from the mid-west. DNA studies of the species show that those coyotes bred with gray wolves, emerged into the New England states, and have extended their range south through New Jersey. The dispersal of coyotes from existing coyote ranges in midwestern areas of the United States, and the availability of habitat are reasons for their presence in the east.

### **Identification**

Biologists maintain that the Eastern Coyote is not a first-generation cross of dogs and coyotes or "coy-dogs" but is a definite coyote strain with more variations in fur color and a larger body size than the western counterpart. In New Jersey, adult males generally weigh between 35 and 40 pounds, with a few heavier animals in the 45-to-50-pound range. Females generally weigh about 5 pounds less, in the 30-to-35-pound range. Color variations range from the typical "western coyote" gray-tan through nearly white/blond, a red foxlike red to almost black. The coyote is a German Shepherd-appearing animal when seen from a distance, but when viewed up-close its thinner muzzle and the fox-like "brush" tail are distinctive.

**Tail length** - from base to fleshy tip is usually longer than 13 inches. Females tail is slightly shorter than the males. The tail is a fox-like "brush" and different than a dog's tail in that the hair grows out from the tailbone nearly equal in length on the top, bottom, and sides.

**Total length** - tip of nose to tip of tail is 42 to 55 inches. Females rarely exceed 48 inches.

**Ears** - large, pointed and well furred. From crown of head to tip of ear along the inside edge is 4 to 4 3/4 inches.

**Pelage** - considerable variation exists ranging from the typical western-appearing gray-tan to almost black. Generally, the face is grizzled with the muzzle sometimes dark or reddish along the sides. There is a black line behind eye and reddish fur behind ears extending back onto the neck. White or cream-colored fur is under the chin or throat. The body is generally grizzled with a dark line, which is sometimes indistinct running along the spine. The sides are often dark with lighter

underparts. The coat is generally lighter in color and grows longer in winter. The legs show a darker strip running partway down the front. Sometimes this coloration occurs on the rear legs as well. The outer sides and rear of both the front and rear legs appear reddish, and this extends to the flanks as well. Feet are usually light or buff colored with reddish between toes occasionally. The tail is usually bushy, grizzled above and lighter below generally, ***but with two distinctive features: a black spot a third of the way down from the animal's body on the tail's upper surface, and a definite black tip (which may be only a few hairs).***

## **Biology**

For most of the year the Eastern Coyote is most active at twilight and early evening, but they may be sighted throughout the day. Coyotes sighted in daylight in late spring and early summer are most likely parents foraging for a meal for their growing families.

Coyotes breed once a year and breeding generally occurs in January/February. During this annual mid-winter breeding season coyotes may be seen and especially heard more regularly than at other times of the year, except when pups are accompanying the adults in late summer and early fall.

Young are born in April or early May after about nine weeks of gestation. The average litter size is about 6 young. Coyotes may utilize woodchuck or fox dens by enlarging them to suit their needs, or they may use natural caves or crevices in rock or holes created by trees that have been uprooted by winds.

Both parents help in raising the young and "packs" of coyotes seen or heard in late summer and the autumn are family groups. Howling heard during the summer through the fall can be attributed to those family groups. By early winter the family groups usually separate, and the adults breed again. The young coyotes generally will not breed until they are two years of age.

Juvenile coyotes disperse at about 6 to 9 month of age and may travel distances of 17 to 19 miles from their natal range. Coyotes have been found to travel from 40 to 50 miles in a day and up to 400 miles in a year's time. Few coyotes in the wild live past the ages of 6 to 8 years.

## **Habitat**

Coyote habitat in New Jersey varies and includes just about all land types from the fringes of urban/suburban development to open farmland to more remote forested areas found in both the Pine Barrens and the mountains of the northern counties. Coyote activity has been documented in all New Jersey counties.

## **Diet**

The Eastern Coyote in New Jersey is an opportunistic feeder. Their main diet consists of voles and mice, but rabbits and any small mammals will be eaten if caught. Birds from songbirds to larger birds such as wild turkeys and waterfowl may also be consumed. Fruit and berries that are in season,

and other types of vegetable matter can and will be eaten by coyotes. Also included in their diet may be deer, fawns when encountered in spring and sick and weak adult animals any time they are found. Healthy adult deer are generally too large and powerful and too fast for a coyote to handle. Carrion is another food source that the Eastern Coyote uses extensively. Carrion may be deer or any animal that our extensive highway system is responsible for, or hunting season losses. Stomach contents of many New Jersey coyotes that were highway mortalities were found to include deer remains. Garbage and pet food left out has been known to be eaten by coyotes and even the tips of leather gloves have been documented in the stomach of a coyote in New Jersey.

Occasionally, coyotes will prey on domestic livestock, particularly young sheep. The coyote in New Jersey has been accused of occasionally taking pet dogs or cats and this does infrequently occur. The coyote generally poses no threat to human life or to farm stock to any great degree although it should be remembered that coyotes are indeed wild animals and should be treated as such.

Western cattlemen and sheep raisers, after years of trying to eliminate the coyote have stopped their efforts after it was determined that the animal is more important as a predator of rodents that make far more inroads on the livestock range than the coyote ever will to the livestock themselves.