

# Coyote facts

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## **Appearance**

The coyote resembles a small German shepherd dog, but carries its tail below the level of the back rather than curved upward. Its upper body is typically light gray to dull yellow, but can vary from mostly black to nearly all gray or white. Coarse outer hairs are usually tipped with black. The underparts are whitish, cream colored or pinkish yellow. A coyote's muzzle is long and narrow; its ears are erect and pointed. The average length of an adult is 44 to 54 inches, including a 15- to 17-inch tail. Weights measured during fall and winter vary from 22 to 42 pounds.

## **Distribution & Abundance**

Coyotes are common throughout Illinois. They're most abundant in the southern, southeastern and west-central parts of the state. They're least abundant in the northern two to three tiers of counties. Coyotes were rare in Illinois for a long time after settlement of the state, but their numbers increased dramatically during the 1970s and early 1980s.

## **Habitat**

Coyotes occur in nearly all types of habitat, including urban and suburban areas. They are most abundant in areas with a mixture of farmland, woodland and grassland.

## **Habits**

A coyote lives in a large area, often 20 to 30 miles in diameter. Several coyotes may share this area. A pack of coyotes consists of an extended family that maintains a strict territory. Members of one pack rarely venture into the territory of another.

Some coyotes do not belong to packs. These solitary coyotes tend to have larger home ranges than pack coyotes and are less respectful of pack boundaries. They sometimes join a pack when one of the members leaves or

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dies.

Coyotes communicate with a variety of barks, yips and howls. They also mark areas with urine, feces or gland secretions, much like domestic dogs. Body language plays an important role in the family social structure and in meetings between strangers. Facial expressions and body gestures can signal a coyote's aggressive, submissive or neutral intentions.

Coyotes prefer semi-open country and like to travel on ridges or old trails. They are most active from dusk until the early morning hours, but are sometimes seen at other times of the day. They can run up to 43 miles per hour for short distances. Water is rarely a barrier because coyotes swim well.

Few coyotes live past 3 to 4 years of age. The oldest coyote found in a study conducted in Illinois during 1996 to 1997 was 13 years old.

## **Foods**

Coyotes are Illinois' largest wild predator. Most of their diet consists of animal matter, but they often eat insects, fruits or berries. Rabbits and mice are important food items in Illinois and other Midwestern states.

A study conducted in Missouri showed the following 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.

In Iowa, winter foods of coyotes were composed by volume of: 51 percent rabbits, 25.5 percent mice, 8.0 percent other mammals, 2.7 percent birds, 0.5 percent plants and miscellaneous. Coyotes sometimes eat carrion, so it's difficult to determine whether livestock and poultry in their diet represent actual kills.

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## **Reproduction**

A few females breed at one year of age, but most mature in their second year. Breeding peaks in late February or early March. A female typically mates for two to five days during this period. The gestation (pregnancy) period is 58 to 63 days. Pups are born during late April or May in a den under a hollow tree, log, brush pile, or even an abandoned building. More often, coyotes raise their young in a remodeled burrow dug originally by a fox, badger, or woodchuck. Litters of 2 to 19 pups have been documented, but four to nine is the norm. 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. The young first come out of the den when they're about 21 days old but don't remain outside for long periods until they are 5 or 6 weeks of age.

Both parents care for the young, especially after they're weaned. Hunting short distances from the den (usually 3 to 5 miles), the parents kill and eat what they catch, then regurgitate it for the pups when they return. The pups begin to learn to hunt for themselves when they are 8 to 12 weeks old. The family usually moves away from the den about this time, and often breaks up in late summer or early fall. After they leave their parents, some young may move up to 120 miles away in search of their own living space.

## **Conservation**

Coyotes are valuable members of the wildlife community and do more good than harm where humans are concerned. However, they occasionally kill livestock, poultry, domestic cats and small dogs, especially where coyotes live in large numbers or in close association with people. Most problems caused by coyotes can be solved by targeting and removing specific coyotes responsible.

Coyotes are harvested during regulated hunting and trapping seasons. An

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average of 7,000 coyotes is harvested each year in Illinois. About 75 percent of these are taken by hunters; 25 percent by trappers. The trapping season is restricted to the fall and winter months, while the hunting season is open year-round. A liberal hunting season allows landowners to remove problem animals without having to obtain a special permit. Biologists monitor the population to ensure that hunting and trapping do not negatively impact the population.