



# The Coyote

## Death Valley National Park



Chester worked on many road and trail crews throughout the National Park Service. While hiking on his days off, Chet loved to watch the creatures of the wild. Whether in the badlands of the Dakotas, the mountains of West Virginia, or the great deserts of the southwest, one critter mesmerized this trail worker the most: wily coyote.

Peeking over the yellow blossoms of the creosote bush, Chet watched and waited, just as the coyote watched and waited. Chester and the coyote saw the truck coming up over hill at the same time. Under Chet's scrutiny, the coyote dashed from the cover of the bursage bush and frightened the grazing jackrabbit.

With a thump and a wallop, the truck provided the coyote with a mighty easy meal! Cruel? Wily? Chet had observed this same behavior over and over again, and to him it was just another way in which this amazing animal went about procuring a tasty tidbit.

The tricky coyote portrayed above has been around a long time. Native American tribes not only depict the coyote as trickster, but a sorcerer, creator, fool or charlatan. Today, coyote descriptions include opportunist, scavenger, predator, adapter, and again, *trickster*. Through all these traits, the coyote has learned to survive, where the cougar and wolf could not, and extend their range into 49 states. Here then, are some general characteristics of wily coyote.

**GENUSSPECIES:** *Canis latrans*.

**FAMILY:** Canidae, includes wolf, fox, jackal and domestic dog.

**SIZE:** Males average 35 pounds, 4 feet from nose to tail and 2 feet at the shoulder. Females average 25 pounds. Smaller than wolves which can weigh 100 pounds. Similar to domestic dogs, yet tail is bushier and snout more pointed.

**COLOR:** Brown, golden, gray, mottled.

**RANGE:** Mexico to Alaska, coast to coast.

**TOP SPEED:** 40 miles per hour - faster than roadrunner by 15 miles per hour!

**SENSE:** Number one sense: sight, then smell and hearing. Coyotes evolved across grass plains where they could see rodents, their main meal.

**DIET:** Sixty percent rodents; as an omnivore, coyote will eat insects, seeds, fruits, fish, lizards, birds, carrion (dead animal carcasses), and sick or lame animals as well.

**PETS:** As an opportunist, coyotes take advantage of unattended cats and small dogs. When food sources are low, two or more coyotes have been known to take on a larger dog. All pets on National Park Ser-

vice lands are required to be on a leash not to exceed 6 feet, and cared for at all times.

**PACKS:** Eighty percent live in pack structure of 3 to 7 coyotes. They display a complicated social structure with dominant and subservient behavior.

**LOVELIFE:** Mate in January/February. Partners for life. Gestation two months. Litters 2-12 pups depending on the amount of food available in their territory. **Avoid coyote burrows from April through mid-summer.** Coyotes will be aggressive to humans or large dogs in an attempt to protect pups.

**COYOTE AND MAN:** Since 1825, humans have tried to eliminate this natural predator with traps, poisoned meat, helicopters and twisted barbed wire, to list a few of the methods. Hundreds of thousands of coyotes have died. Yet, in the face of destruction, coyotes have countered with behavior changes. As more fellow coyotes die, more females breed and they produce larger litters!

**PREDATORS:** Wolves are the natural predator of the coyote. Mountain lions have been known to munch a coyote. Roadways cause fatalities. Human activity.

Coyotes have people all figured out! They have learned to avoid traps and poisoned meat, and to come to visitors for a hand-out. Park regulations forbid the feeding of wild animals. Cheetos, watermelon and beer will disrupt the digestive system of this hunter! Once they become accustomed to people food, they become *beggar* coyotes. The animal may become more aggressive in an attempt to get your food. At this point, the coyote may have to be

destroyed. **Don't be responsible for the death of a coyote.** Left to their natural diet of rodents, the coyote plays an important role in nature.

What you can do is marvel at the antics, the howling and the adaptive ways of the coyote, just as Chester did one day at Yellowstone Lake in Wyoming. During a lunch break, Chet noticed two coyotes hiding in the woods while pelicans splashed in the nearby water. He marveled as one coyote lifted its tail and slowly wagged it back and forth. Then the coyote came out of the woods, played with sticks, ignored the pelicans and walked away. Baffled and awed, Chet watched as the curious pelicans approached the woods where the tail had wagged. When they reached the edge of the woods, the hidden coyote burst forth and grabbed one pelican. Trickster then trotted off in the direction of its cohort. Cruel? Nope. That's down right wily!

