

Coyotes in Florida

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Did you know that we have coyotes in Florida? Generally we associate these critters with the western states. They do well in the Sunshine State because they easily adapt to different habitats. They can even benefit from human activities. Coyotes will eat just about anything, can live most anywhere, have lots of babies and in Florida they have few enemies. Most of the predators of the coyote, such as the gray wolf, red wolf, grizzly bear and puma, are not found in the south. Like most exotic species, the coyote is thriving in our state because there is ample food, space and opportunity.

Coyotes are part of the dog family (Canidae). Generally, they measure from about 39 to 60 inches long with a 15 ½ inch tail. Adults usually weigh in at about 24 to 37 pounds. Males are generally larger than females. They make different sounds such as howls, yips and barks, much like the family dog. They have extremely good eyesight, keen hearing and a strong sense of smell. These senses aid the coyote in hunting and surviving.

Their diet consists of rodents, rabbits, lizards, snakes, insects, grasses, fruit, grains, fish and carrion. They also prey on fawns and young turkeys. Some ranchers have stated that coyotes cause them problems because they prey on newly born calves when they are most vulnerable.

Even though coyotes don't necessarily mate for life, it is not uncommon for the same pair to mate year after year. The female's gestation period is about 2 months and she may have anywhere from 2 to 6 pups. The amount of young that the coyote has depends on the availability of food. When resources are plentiful, the litter sizes generally increase. Both parents care for the young with occasional assistance from some yearlings. Sometimes females even share their den with other mothers and their pups. Coyotes can interbreed with red wolves and dogs and produce fertile offspring.

Their dens are typically found in hollow logs, abandoned burrows, dense vegetation or brush-covered slopes. When the pups reach 8 to 10 weeks, they leave the den and move into unoccupied areas to establish their own new territory. They live to be about 5 or 6 years old in the wild. Most coyote deaths occur in the first year of their lives.

They are elusive creatures and are usually more active at dawn and dusk. However, they can be seen most anytime. They may travel individually or in groups of 2 or 3. They are social with each other and when excited may yip and bark.

There is no question that coyote numbers are increasing in our state. They may be potential competitors to some of our native species such as the bobcat and fox. More research must be done to see if the coyote is having an effect on the endangered Florida Panther. If the coyotes are preying on deer and other panther food sources, steps must be taken to protect the already endangered animal. In addition, loss of livestock may become a problem. Ranchers may have to take action and find resources to help control this exotic creature.

As with many exotic animals, coyotes were brought to Florida by humans. Their original purpose was to be pursued by hunting dogs in the 1920s. Since the coyote is so easily adaptable, the rest, as they say, is

history. One native species in north Florida has already been impacted by the coyote. The critters seem to enjoy the taste of sea turtle eggs. Like the Florida Panther, these turtles are endangered species and this causes a real threat to their existence.

Research is currently being done by the University of Florida regarding coyotes in south Florida. Studies on mortality, reproduction and impacts on cattle operations are being done. If you would like to know more about these interesting animals you can visit the “South Florida Coyote Study” website at <http://www.wec.ufl.edu/range/coyotes/>.