



Coywolf

(EASTERN COYOTE)

Canis latrans x lycaon

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JON WAY

Elusive, yet abundant.
Loved, and hated.
Omni-present, but living at low densities.

All of these seemingly contradictory statements hold true for the coywolf (also known as the eastern coyote), an emerging species that has saturated all of northeastern North America in the past 50 years.

You may have observed one in a suburb of the Northeast. Maybe in the deep forest of the snowy North Woods of Maine, or on the frozen lakeshores of Nova Scotia. Possibly you have seen one stalking the agricultural regions outside of Burlington, Vermont and Manchester, New Hampshire. Maybe you have seen a mated pair gliding among the mansions of southern Connecticut or have heard pups howling in the woods of towns in Boston's Metro-West; or perhaps you have spied their tracks while hiking the Appalachian Trail running from Baxter State Park in Maine and stretching southwest to the mountains of the Whites of New Hampshire, then further through Massachusetts and southern New England.

One thing is sure, if you live in the Northeast, it is likely that what most call the eastern coyote lives nearby. It is found throughout the region, from New Jersey and Pennsylvania up to Maine and New York, and ranges north into Canada, including southern Quebec and Ontario, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick.

Northeastern North America is home to this large "coyote," which averages 30 to 45 pounds. Its paw print is oval and ranges from 3 to 3.5 inches long, which is literally off the chart where most field guides are concerned, describing coyotes as having a maximum 2.5-inch-long footprint. They feed on virtually anything ranging from mice (especially meadow voles) and garbage, to rabbits and cats, to adult white-tailed deer, and possibly even young moose. They are highly social, often living in packs of four individuals. The breeding pair mates in mid-January to early February and the female gives birth in late-March into April, usually later in more northerly areas. All pack members take care of the pups including the breeding pair and their full-grown

offspring, which delay dispersal to remain in their natal territory.

Their colors range from blonde to darker brown and black, though they are usually tawny brown or agouti in appearance with much speckled black and brown on their magnificent coats. The attributes of big body size and variable coat colors are largely the result of hybridization with wolves. These attributes have led to the relatively new concept that we should actually be calling these animals coywolves, which more accurately describes the genetic composition of this successful canid.

It is thought that this creature formed in the early 1900s in southern Ontario when wolves were being exterminated from the region, and favorable habitat change (clearing of forests), along with the removal of wolves as competition,

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allowed western coyotes to colonize the area. It is thought that coyotes and wolves hybridized and their offspring began colonizing the Northeast. Bigger than western coyotes and smaller than wolves, these animals were initially called coydogs by locals; then in the 1960s and 1970s it was recommended that they be called eastern coyotes, essentially a variant of coyote. Though they didn't actually have any dog in them, they were noticeably more massive than their namesake.

It wasn't until the early 2000s that genetic work verified that they indeed were hybrids between western coyotes and wolves. However, the major finding by Brad White's Lab at Trent University was that the wolf responsible for this unique event was not the larger and more well-known gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) but rather a smaller type of wolf called the eastern wolf (*Canis lycaon*). The eastern wolf is believed to be genetically similar to the red wolf (*Canis rufus*) and is likely the same species, meaning that it probably

ranged all the way up the East Coast rather than historically living just in the southeast U.S. as was originally thought. Interestingly, this wolf is genetically more closely related to coyotes than to gray wolves, although they can mate/hybridize with both. In the Northeast, the only known place where wolves and coyotes hybridize, samples are approximately one third wolf and two thirds coyote but one coyote-related haplotype (39 percent of total samples) is eastern specific, meaning that it is not known to be present in any western coyote populations.

The habitat of the coywolf is tremendously variable and includes all available land ranging from wilderness to rural to urban. However, they survive best, and are often found at higher densities, in places with lots of edge habitat such as agricultural and suburban regions. These

areas provide cover and an abundant food supply due to increased browse available to their usual prey, and often are less hunted by humans due to private property and restrictions on the use of guns in urbanized areas. Thus, during your travels in and around the A.T. be sure to keep your eyes and ears out for glimpses of this elusive creature and, while sleeping in your summer tent, listen for their infamous howling while you are sacked-out from a long day afoot. Those fortunate enough to see signs of the coywolf, or maybe the actual creature, should consider themselves lucky to know that this area is now more wild and healthier ecologically by having this relatively large predator living amongst us.

Jonathan Way is the author of *Suburban Howls*, which details his experiences and research findings in layman's terms.

For more information visit:

www.EasternCoyoteResearch.com