The Trickster

The trickster. He is a cunning, sly, rule breaker, a teacher of lessons. He is a jokster, a prankster, a shape changer and sometimes the creator of the universe. He is also a varmit, a pet eater, and a chicken stealer. He is coyote - any coyote whether male, female or pup. Native American and First Nation cultures cherish him and his many roles. He is God’s dog. For many of us it’s more hate and fear than love – he’s not our dog.

In the early hours you might hear the frantic yipping of a family group as they meet up after a night of hunting. When pups are still young and in training their excited higher register begging says “feed me, feed me.” Year long investigations of coyote scat show they are omnivores, eating both meat and plants, whatever is easily available. They are fond of carrion, rodents, rabbits, insects, cactus fruit, mesquite pods and juniper berries, fan palm dates, and unconfined domestic pets.

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) are found living in just about every habitat from deserts to dense forests to arctic tundra — and, not surprisingly, cities and suburbs. Prior to the arrival of Europeans they were most commonly found in the Great Plains of North America. Now, after being hunted and trapped for over 200 years, their range extends from Central America to the Artic including all the United States, Canada and Mexico. This is one smart, tricky dog. Not only did they take advantage of the new habitats provided by settlers, there are more of them now than when the United States Constitution was signed.¹

One reason coyotes could expand into new habitats was the fear settlers had of wolves, to the extent of eliminating them entirely from the lower 48 states.

What the loss of wolves meant for coyotes is demonstrated in Yellowstone National Park today. With the reintroduction of wolves into the park in 1995 coyotes lost their status as top predator to the wolf.² Researchers have documented that wolves do not like coyote competition and will attack and kill coyotes. As wolf numbers increased coyote numbers have decreased although they are still found throughout the park.³ Scientists believe that this jockeying for position will result in what was once the natural equilibrium for these two competing canids. One of the unexpected trickle down effects of this interaction is that fox, previously predated on by coyotes, are increasing in numbers.

In the California Deserts coyotes are common although not often seen. Unexpectedly, they are active during daylight hours but when seen silently dissolve into the landscape. Coyotes are wary of human contact unless injured or trained to handouts. Residents and visitors occasionally fall victim to the ‘poor cute thing’ impulse and offer food to wild animals. Coyotes, drawing on their heritage as scavengers, quickly learn to become expert beggers. However, what may feel like an exciting interaction with a wild animal is likely to lead to an untimely and lingering death for the coyote from starvation or from unwary behavior around varmit hunters.

I grew up with the sound of coyotes – it was the night music that put me to sleep. To see one while I was walking alone down the road or hiking in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains gave me – how to say this – substance. Once we saw each other, our eyes met but didn’t make contact, not really. I was a part of the landscape, checked off as present but not important. This laissez-faire acceptance pleased me enormously and I have never forgotten it. I knew

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¹ Our predator control learning curve is non-existent. The California general season for coyotes is all year with no bag or possession limit.


³ There is a wealth of information about coyotes on the internet. Especially interesting is the first hand description of a summer research project in Yellowstone National park by field biologist Lincoln Larson. [http://www.fieldtripearth.org/article.xml?id=1024](http://www.fieldtripearth.org/article.xml?id=1024).
nothing about tricksters then but I appreciated rule
breakers and had instigated a few pranks. I recognized
him even if he didn’t recognize me.