

Whitetail Predation

Song Dog

COYOTE — derived from the Aztec word coytl, which refers to the god of music, dance and song. Call me a biologist, but coyotes are fascinating. Smaller than the neighbor's German shepherd, they weigh between 20 and 50 pounds and likely live only six or eight years in the wild, but have the reputation of a Goliath. Revered by ancient cultures and disdained by the white man. Given its modern history, I'm not sure what the coyote has to sing and dance about.

This species has been hunted, trapped and poisoned for decades and yet persists, even expanding its range and numbers. Like our beloved whitetail, coyotes can occupy a wide range of habitats, from open lands to forests, but do best in areas with variety: brushy country, ravines, thickets and small woodlots. Coyotes can be solitary, live in mated pairs or be part of a pack of three to seven related individuals. They depend primarily on vision, followed by hearing then olfaction to hunt. They search, stalk, pounce (for small stuff like mice) or rush (for stuff a bit bigger) their prey. Excess food is cached by burying it.

As for the coyote menu, there isn't much that is not on it — mice, rabbits, hare, squirrels, groundhogs, snakes, bugs, fruit, carrion, whatever is most abundant. Variety seems to be the spice of life for the coyote.

So what about deer? If you listen to the buzz, coyotes are akin to the apocalypse for the whitetail. Don't believe all the hype. Historically speaking, white-tailed deer are more abundant now than they have ever been. Coyotes are not a new predator, and deer, like coyotes, know how to survive. Coyotes incorporate deer into their diet when they are plentiful. Annually, deer are most abundant and easy to catch in June, July and August. Deer less than three months old are on the menu for coyotes. After that, they are off the list until the next year. That's what we learned when we conducted the largest fawn study in North America.

Deer are just another opportunistic food item for the coyote. Removing coyotes from the predator equation does not mean more fawns will live, though. In a recent study, coyote removal only boosted neonate survival when lagomorph (rabbit) populations were low; in other words, when coyotes did not have an alternate prey option.

So despite false accusations and unrelenting persecution, the coyote survives. Perhaps that is what all the singing is about.

By PGC Biologist J. T. Fleegle

