

COYOTE

The coyote, a member of the dog family, is an intelligent, adaptable animal with a keen sense of smell. It is an excellent hunter, forager, and scavenger eating whatever it finds - rabbit, lizard, snake, rodents, snails, birds and their eggs, or the remains of an already dead animal. Like any other wild animal, it has its place in the chain of life helping to keep the rodent population under control and cleaning up the environment. If, sometimes, it gets too close to suburbia, it is because the wild lands it needs for survival are becoming fewer and fewer and game trails are being wiped out by urban sprawl. Garbage cans can be very tempting to any omnivorous animal whose food supply has been reduced. The coyote has a sweet tooth and enjoys fruits and berries and honey when it can find it. It is not above visiting the farmer's fields and is said to be especially fond of watermelons, always choosing the ripest of the patch. It won't find watermelons in Malibu Creek State Park but will find wild berries, cherries, gourds, acorns, and other good things.

Coyotes are not pack animals in the same way as wolves and wild dogs but they sometimes cooperate in the hunt. Usually, they hunt alone and maintain a hunting territory, marking its boundaries with urine. They like to travel on high ground so that they have a good view of the surrounding area. They prefer to hunt at night and to sleep in a cool spot during the day.

In prairie dog country, badgers and coyotes appear to hunt together. But the clever coyote probably recognizes the superior digging skills of the badger and hangs around ready to chase down any prairie dogs that escape.

The coyote has a "song" that is all its own, the howling and the yipping is rarely mistaken for any other animal. It is amazing what a noise one or two "serenading" coyotes can make.

It is thought that coyotes mate for life. The pups are born in April or May in a den which is usually the enlarged burrow of some other animal but may be in a hollow log or even just an oval scratched under a bush. The mother takes very good care of her babies. To confuse enemies, she will approach the den each time from a different direction and will move the pups to a new location if danger threatens. The pups nurse for 3 - 8 weeks and are also fed predigested, regurgitated meat by the parents who cooperate in their care. A pup from an earlier litter sometimes acts as "aunt" or "uncle" and helps to raise the

youngsters. As the pups grow older they are taught to hunt and for several months before they become independent go on hunting trips with their parents.

Coyotes must have water and will dig down as much as four or five feet into a dry creek or river bed to obtain it. Desert travellers have often made use of these "coyote wells". However, at Malibu Creek such hard work is not necessary, water can always be found at springs or in creek pools.

Many are the stories of the wily coyote in the myths and legends of the Native American peoples. To the Chumash, Sky Coyote was a supernatural being who, every night, played the gambling game of Peon with Sun. At the end of the year the score was totalled. If Sky Coyote won, the following year would be a good one for the Chumash, with good rains and plenty of food. If Sun won, then the year would be dry and hot and bring suffering to the people.

In a Chumash story about coyote's song, Coyote was on a journey and was feeling sad. He asked himself why he was sad when he had done so much. He made up a song:

I am travelling - I, I, I
I go around the world - I.
I cause the mist - I, I.
When I climb the mountain tops
I cause clouds,
I cause rain.
Long live Coyote!
He will always be!

The Chumash regarded the coyote as their friend.

Coyote (*Canis latrans*)

