

Nighttime serenades of wily coyotes around Vernon and other B.C. communities are heard more frequently lately as they are moving into urban areas.

Attempts to eradicate coyotes in B.C. since the early 1900s have proven unsuccessful in the long run. To appreciate their success, we need to understand this intelligent, adaptable, human-wary but wily critter.

Coyote, or sen k'lip, was revered by Okanagan First Nations Indians as a wily trickster and teacher. One legend states that "if all the animals in the world were to die, the coyote would be the last one left," attesting to its intelligence and adaptability.

Maligned as vermin in the last century, eradication of coyotes was attempted with a bounty of \$1-2.50 per pelt. Rural youth and trappers were encouraged to shoot them on site in an attempt to protect livestock and game. By the 1950s, a strychnine-like compound was added to meat baits to poison coyotes in wilderness areas.

How have coyote populations risen then against these efforts to eliminate them and in spite of predation by **wolves**, cougars and bears that kill them for territorial reasons as competitors? This may be the key. As we eliminate their predators from our growing urban areas, coyotes have moved in.

Also, coyotes adapt to highly varied habitats and opportunistic food sources.

Coyotes are spreading throughout North America. They are frequently seen in fields around town and even at golf courses. People have witnessed them catch golf balls which may be mistaken for eggs. Often, coyotes are seen jumping and pouncing on meadow voles or mice in fields, catching the rodents between their front paws and gulping them down. They'll also snag ground squirrels emerging from holes.

Like other dogs, coyotes have a remarkable sense of smell along with great sight and hearing. They are agile and swift and can chase down prey at speeds up to 65 km/hr. They will eat almost any small animals that they can catch. But, nearly 90 per cent of their diet is small mammals. So they are excellent rodent population controllers. They will also eat rabbits, hares, ground squirrels, birds, eggs, bird seed, berries, grasshoppers, snakes, lizards, frogs, fish, garbage and carrion, and even munch grass.

Coyotes occasionally hunt in packs, but mated pairs and solitary coyotes are most common. Occasionally, winter packs will run down a floundering deer. They generally don't kill livestock bigger than chickens but can depend on carcasses during winter.

Coyotes look like a very small German shepherd about the size of a terrier. But unlike other canines, coyotes run with their bushy tails down and sometimes skulk around as if guilty. They have narrow, pointed muzzles and large, hairy upright ears. Their fur is grizzled gray on top, buff brown on the sides and lighter underneath. And their feet are compact.

They are out anytime of the year, day or night. But they are most active at dusk and dawn when their yipping, yapping and howling choruses are heard.

Thus, coyote's name from the Spanish (Mexican) word for shut up (callete). Their Latin name *Canis latrans* means barking dog as does their Aztec name Coyotl.

Stay tuned for part two on coyotes in next month's column featuring coyote habitat, lifecycle and living with coyotes. For more on coyotes read *Carnivores of British Columbia* by David Hatler, David Nagorsen and Alison Beal, available at our library.

Roseanne Van Ee enthusiastically shares her knowledge of the outdoors to help readers experience and enjoy nature. Follow her on Facebook.

