
inside a coyote family

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Coyote news stories tend to be based on negative “incidents” – either a dog disappears, or someone has spotted a Coyote crossing the street where they think there should not be one. Newspapers thrive on controversy and sensationalism, and this kind of story fills the bill. But there is Coyote news out there which is positive, interesting, useful and newsworthy, too!

Coyotes are one of our truly all-American native animals, along with bison, eagles and a handful of others, that live exclusively in North America. They have been moving closer to most urban centers for over ten years.

In San Francisco, where Coyotes were first spotted in 2002 after a long period of absence from the area, I’m now finding that most park-goers are thrilled to have these newcomers in our parks. In fact, people often come to the parks specifically to get a glimpse of this fascinating new “wildness in the city,” making Coyotes an actual asset. To keep things in perspective, Coyotes number in the dozens in San Francisco right now, compared to a city like Chicago, where their number is estimated to be over 2000 – but few people ever see them.

coyote observations

When you spot one, the elusive Coyote is usually scurrying off to avoid you, or you may see him foraging on a hillside in the distance. You might even see him attempting to convey a message to your dog, if the dog gets too close – Coyotes and dogs don’t mix, and should to be kept far apart.

Less obvious than the physical sightings are the social interactions and family behaviors that are the essence of a Coyote’s life. Now in my eighth year of photo-documenting urban Coyote behavior, both within the family pack as well as around people and pets in urban parks and natural open spaces, I observe that Coyotes have remarkably full family lives.

coyote family life

A Coyote pack is actually a family unit, and there appears to be only



Affection: Gentle nuzzles, or snuggling and rubbing against one another is commonplace.

one Coyote family pack in any given territory, so Coyote social life involves the family. In any species that mates for life, such as the Coyote, there is a bond beyond procreation which makes it last. Only 3% to 5% of all mammalian species mate for life – as opposed to 80% of all birds. In these species, the glue that binds is that both parents raise the young.

Coyote family members seem to like doing things together, and they interact constantly. Their nuclear family life is not so different from our own. Interactions between pups and parents, or between pups, are something we might expect. But what has intrigued me are the interactions between adult mated pairs – they are special buddies! I’ve witnessed a mother/

Communication: Coyotes communicate visually as well as vocally over a distance. Below, a youngster looks to her mother for feedback and cues.



Above, greetings occur daily when coyote family members get together for their activities. Greetings involve nose touches, lots of body contact, nuzzling, squealing and wiggles!

Dads play a big role: Below, Dad brings home the bacon. He’ll spend many hours doing his share of minding and entertaining the kids.





Adults play: These two adults, a mated pair, are horsing around, teasing each other and having fun as they return from a trekking expedition together.



Curiosity: Coyotes are always curious about what the other is doing. Here, the male of a bonded pair has come over to check on what the female has found.



Asking for help, above: the little female to the left backed into her companion, showing him where it hurt and requesting help. He obliged by trying to find the irritant and pull it out.

father pair display surprising affection, camaraderie, playfulness, care and excitement.

The ability to communicate with each other plays a big role in their social behavior: Coyotes communicate their emotions, and they signal important information such as danger and fear, through body language and facial expressions, and even through their numerous vocalizations.

the shape of a coyote day

For the most part, Coyotes sleep through the greater part of daylight hours in order to avoid humans, overlapping with us only a few hours of each day when we might be lucky enough to see one. This is why it is rare to see much of their social behavior.

As dusk settles in, they get up and begin moving around a little, waiting for human activity to die down, and waiting with anticipation to meet others from their family.

The active part of their day often begins with a rendezvous: there are greetings and squeals and sniffing and playing and cuddling. It's an intense, if short, time of family interactions.

Later they might remain in the area or leave to hunt, explore and mark their territories, either all together, or sometimes in smaller groups of two, or even alone. There is time for play, bantering, family interactions, and just hanging-out, and, of course, learning takes place constantly through

observation and also through discipline – this is how their behavior is shaped.

Before daybreak, most Coyotes return to their various “safe” resting spots. It's interesting that starting from a very young age, the different family members do not always all sleep together, often not even in the same area, probably as a protective measure against predators.

To learn more about the behaviors you can expect if you see a coyote in an urban setting, and steps to take if you find yourself unexpectedly in the wrong circumstances with a coyote, visit CoyoteCoexistence.com and watch *Coyotes As Neighbors*. The video is based on first-hand observations and photos taken mostly in San Francisco.



Education: Above, a mother coyote buries some prey to facilitate the job of hunting for a pup! I have seen pups romping, playing and just lying around this area. The next day, Mom brought the pups here and a youngster dug up the prize!

Grooming and care: Below, the female of a mated pair removes ticks from her companion. She began on his sides and worked over both sides of his body, removing ticks (which were heavy this year) and ended up on his face.



Cooperation: Bonded coyote pairs work cooperatively raising the pups. They both guard the pups, play with them and feed them. Here, both coyote parents are working cooperatively to escort the recalcitrant pup in the middle to a place of safety!