

## Environmentalk With Kathy

# Tis' the Season of Sharing - let's share the earth with coyotes

The holidays are the season of family and the season of sharing. We can learn a lot from coyotes about family life and also contribute to the glorious diversity of our world by sharing it with them peacefully. And we can learn all this from Janet Kessler, San Francisco's resident coyote expert.

Kessler will be the first to tell you that she does not have formal training in ecology or wildlife; her undergraduate degree is in cultural anthropology and her graduate degree is in art history. She credits both parts of her education with helping her learn how to understand and document the family interactions of these fascinating creatures.

Coyotes live all over the continental U.S. They used to be native to San Francisco and lived alongside the Native Americans and later the Spanish. Coyotes were driven out of San Francisco as it became more populous. Then in 2002, they returned. It is unlikely that they trotted across the Golden Gate Bridge; it is more probable that someone trapped a number of them in Northern California and let them loose in the Presidio (which is, by the way, illegal, as is killing them or otherwise threatening them.) Kessler has found that some come from Mendocino, while others may have wandered in from south of here.

Historically, coyotes expanded their range - from Mexico and the midwest. They spread far and wide when their main predator, the wolf, was driven out by hunting and by loss of habitat. In the eastern U.S. coyotes interbred with dogs and wolves, are larger, and can even come in black! Here in California, coyotes are a buff color, with variations in tone that help them to blend in to the dry, summer landscape.

Wherever they are, like people, coyotes have adapted to their new habitat with ease, and basically, just want to be left alone. In addition to their adaptability, coyotes have a lot of other similarities to humans and our human society.

**Coyotes have a strong family structure.**

Like people, the main social structure for the coyote is the family. They search for a mate and then mate for life. Most coyotes live in families, with an alpha male and female. Both mom and dad take care of the pups. The youngsters stick around until about 9 months of age and sometimes up to two years, and then they either leave on their own, or are told to move out - in essence, to get their own job (territory) to make room for the next generation.

**Coyotes take care of their families and siblings.**

Both mom and dad raise the pups. Coyotes have been known to help injured family members. They groom each other constantly, which helps with flea or tick infestations and also cements good family relations.

**Coyotes have family arguments.**

Coyotes have emotions, moods, problems, and family issues. They may argue with each other. In one family observed by Kessler, two young males have taken a dislike to each other and either fight or blatantly ignore each other. Disruption will not be tolerated for very long by the adults. At some point, one of those boys causing the problems is going to be drummed out by mom or dad or by the more dominant brother. Order is very important in the coyote family.

**Coyotes control the size of their fam-**



ilies.

When a female coyote comes of age, the alpha female will harass her so much that she reacts to the stress by not becoming pregnant. This is known as being behaviorally sterile. If a hunter kills members of a family, then the younger females will produce litters, and the family's numbers can increase above what was there before the killings.

**Coyotes maintain a variety of family structures.**

Like people, the coyote family structure varies. It can be just mom and dad, or mom, dad, and the pups, or all of the above and the yearlings. Coyotes also may live in groups of just siblings, for example, a brother and two sisters. And there is the occasional loner. No matter who makes up the family group, they have one goal - to survive. And to do this effectively, they need to protect their territory.

**Coyote families stake out territory.**

We say, "A (wo)man's home is his/her castle." What if your castle included your home, your job, and a small plot of land where you grew all of your food? That is what territory is to a coyote. Coyotes need a certain amount of room to forage and to provide a home for their family. When you see a coyote acting aggressively, they are only trying to protect their territory.

Think what happens when someone approaches your front door or, even worse, enters your private side or back yard without your permission. You are immediately on alert; you want to know their intent. That is what happens when you enter a coyote's territory. They will watch you and decide if you are a threat. If you walk away, they will stand down. If you walk towards them, then they have to decide how to deal with you. If your dog runs towards them, then the coyote has to decide how to deal with him. If pups are nearby, the results will not be good for your dog. After all, how would you react if a strange person ran towards your children and you had no idea of their intent? Protection of the young is a universal instinct, and coyotes are the same as we are in this reaction.

**Communication is important to keep a coyote family running smoothly.**

How many times does Dear Abby say to someone asking for advice, "Have you tried talking with your spouse/friend/boss?" Coyotes are constantly communicating. Communication takes various forms, including facial expressions, body language, rough play, and vocalizations -

yips, howls, barks, and snarls. Communication stabilizes the internal hierarchy and is the basic glue that holds the family together.

**Coyotes hold family reunions.**

Does your family get together once a year or every few years? Coyotes have you beat. They often sleep separately and then, upon arising, they search each other out and have a joyous reunion, with play, jumping, grooming, and vocalizations. After that -- it is time to search out the day's or night's meals.

**Coyotes are diurnal, but ....**

Like people, coyotes are naturally diurnal but also like people, coyotes will adjust to a nocturnal schedule. In cities, there are fewer people and cars to avoid at night, so many coyotes have adjusted to a nighttime schedule.

**Ways that coyotes are smarter and better equipped than people**

Coyotes have an extraordinarily keen sense of smell. Through scent, they can tell if another animal is sick or injured. Their hearing is better than ours, and they can hear higher and lower pitches than we can. Their eyesight is also excellent - and they can see in the dark. Coyotes can run up to 43 MPH and they can run up steep hillsides.

Coyotes are so adaptable that they have learned to watch traffic patterns to avoid cars. Kessler has observed some coyotes looking both ways before crossing the street and others waiting for traffic lights to change. Actually, that may put them ahead of some people in intelligence, at least in my experience.

**Domestic dogs are much more dangerous to people than coyotes.**

Only two deaths of humans from coyotes have ever been recorded in the U.S. In North America people report about 17 bites or scratches from coyotes a year -- and those are mostly from someone interfering in a dog vs. coyote encounter or hand feeding coyotes. On the other hand, people go to emergency rooms for over 1,000 dog bites every day.

The number of reported coyote rabies cases is relatively low; in fact, coyotes help to mitigate rabies by eating the wildlife that does spread rabies, such as raccoons and skunks.

**How to do citizen science.**

Kessler is up early every morning and out by 5:00 a.m. to observe her favorite creatures. She comes home mid-morning and is out again at the end of the day, to record their activities until it is too dark for her (with her limited human

eyesight) to see. You don't have to do that -- you can go to her prolific website and watch videos, read articles, and look at her beautiful photos to learn more the fascinating family life of coyotes.

**For this season of sharing, here's how to share the earth peacefully with coyotes:**

Don't feed them. Never. Ever.

Don't intrude on them by approaching them -- give them plenty of space. Rec and Park puts up signs warning of coyote sightings. Pay attention to them!

When you do see a coyote - walk away slowly and quietly.

Keep your dog on a leash and lead it away. It is not 'fun' for a coyote to 'play' with a dog. And it could be very damaging to your dog.

Pick up your small dog. Coyotes eat skunks and raccoons -- how big is your dog? How is the coyote supposed to know that he/she is a pet?

Keep your domestic cats indoors, the healthiest place for them. Not only are outdoor cats more susceptible to disease and injury, but also cats are tasty bites for coyotes. If this upsets you, remember that your neighborhood bird-lover is not happy when Fluffy shows up at their bird feeder. According to National Geographic, "domestic cats pounce on one billion to four billion birds a year in the lower 48 states, as well as 6.3 billion to 22.3 billion small mammals and hundreds of millions of reptiles and amphibians."

Don't use rat poison. Coyotes will eat poisoned prey, and the current poisons either kill the coyote outright or dull its reactions, resulting in it getting hit by cars or otherwise injured. Rat poison kills more than coyotes -- see our March 2018 article on the dreadful toll that rat poison takes on wildlife. Tolerate the coyotes -- and they will dispose of your rats, mice, and gophers for you. And it's free!

With a little understanding and help from people like Kessler, we can enjoy the company of our fellow creatures as we share the earth with them.

Kessler's website: <https://coyoteyipps.com/>

National Geographic on birds killed by cats: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/2019/09/essay-to-save-birds-should-we-kill-off-cats/>

Katherine Howard is an environment and open space advocate in San Francisco.