

Coyote Predation - Description

Coyotes are the most common and the most serious predator of livestock in the western United States. Westwide, they cause a majority of the predation losses of sheep, goats and cattle. In some states, this is also true for hogs and poultry.

In attacks on adult sheep and goats, coyotes typically bite the throat just behind the jaw and below the ear, although repeated bites made while shifting their hold may obscure the initial tooth punctures. Death commonly results from suffocation and shock; blood loss is usually a secondary cause of death. On small prey, such as young lambs and kids, coyotes may kill by biting the head, neck or back, causing massive tissue and bone damage. Young lambs, kids and pigs may be carried away by coyotes and disappear without a trace. Bloody soil and vegetation, missing animals or females searching for their young may be the only evidence that a problem exists.

Some coyotes kill by attacking the flanks or hind-quarters, causing shock and loss of blood. This is quite common on calves, but is less common with sheep and goats. It does seem to occur more often in sheep during winter months, possibly because of the heavy fleece during this period. Death of the calf and severe injuries to the genital organs and hindquarters of cows are characteristic when coyotes attack cows giving birth. This is more common with heifers (young cows having their first calf) than with older cows. It is also quite common in some areas to see calves bobtailed by coyote attacks.

Young coyotes are more likely to kill in a manner not typical of that which is expected, but some coyotes consistently kill in an atypical manner. Coyotes, like other animals, are individuals and each may have unique food habits and behavior depending on circumstances.

Some animals are attacked by coyotes without being killed but die later from injuries and infection. In these cases, sheep and goats are more likely to have throat injuries and cows and calves to have injuries to the hindquarters. Calves frequently are fed upon extensively at the hindquarters before they die. Even with prompt medical treatment, few of these animals survive because massive infections usually develop.

Coyotes normally begin feeding on kills in the flank or just behind the ribs, but there are exceptions. Some seem to choose the viscera (liver, heart, lungs, mesenteric fat, etc.) first and the milk-filled stomach is a preferred item. Feeding on the hindquarters is also common and small animals may be entirely consumed.

Multiple coyote kills are frequent and many of these kills are not fed upon. Coyotes usually leave the hide and most of the skeleton of larger animals relatively intact, but when food is scarce, they may leave only the largest bones. Coyote feeding leaves

ragged edges on muscle tissue and tendons, splintered and chewed ribs and other bones. Scattered wool, bits of skin and other parts are characteristic where coyotes feed extensively on larger carcasses.

The canine teeth of coyotes vary in size and spacing but on the average coyote (20 to 30 pounds), normal spacing between the upper canine teeth is 1 1/8 to 1 3/8 inches and 1 to 1 1/4 inches between the lower canine teeth. As a result of tissue pliancy and movement and multiple bites, paired punctures made by the canine teeth are often difficult to identify and an accurate estimate of the canine tooth size and spacing may not be possible. Nonetheless, when these can be determined they are a definite aid in confirming the predator species responsible.

If not disturbed at a feeding site, coyotes often rub and roll after feeding, possibly to clean themselves. They may also urinate and defecate soon after feeding and usually scratch with their feet after defecation. These activities leave useful evidence if it can be found.

Some dog tracks may be easily confused with coyote tracks even when the tracks are well defined. The shape of tracks, the length of the stride, the prominence of nail marks and the pattern of travel are important. Coyote tracks tend to be more oval-shaped and compact than those of common dogs. Nail marks are less prominent and the tracks tend to follow a straight line more closely than those of dogs. Except for greyhounds and whippets, most dogs of the same weight as coyotes have a slightly shorter stride. The normal coyote track is about 2 inches wide and 2 1/2 inches long, with the hind track slightly smaller than the front. The average coyote's stride at a trot is 16 to 18 inches and the hind tracks tend to follow directly in line with or on top of front tracks.

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