



## MAMMALS

Status: Common Native Statewide

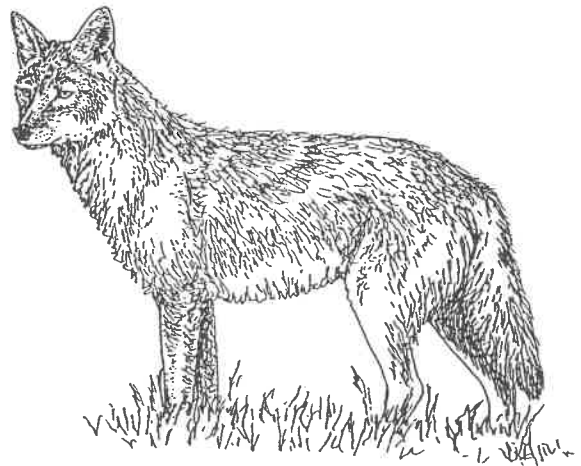
# COYOTE

(*Canis latrans*)

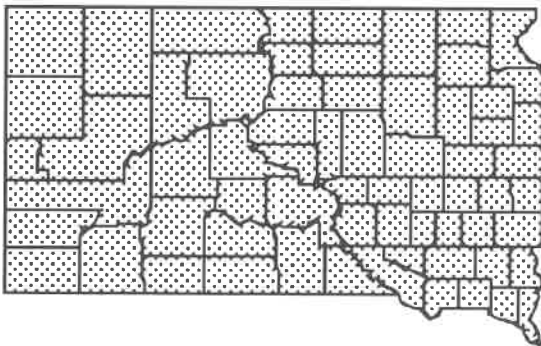
## State Mammal of South Dakota

### Description

In size, the coyote is similar to a small collie dog, with erect pointed ears, slender muzzle, and a bushy tail. Coyotes are predominantly gray in color, with a light gray to cream-colored belly. However, among some individuals and in different parts of the United States, there are color variations ranging from nearly black to a rusty red or nearly white. In South Dakota, coyotes from the southern part of the state mostly have a reddish tint with a buff colored belly. In the northwestern part of the state and badlands area, they appear more white in color with a pure white belly.



The average adult male coyote will weigh from 25 to 35 pounds (11-16 kg). The average adult female will weigh from 22 to 30 pounds (10-14 kg). Coyote-dog hybrids (coydogs) are becoming quite common in some areas of South Dakota. These animals can vary greatly from the typical coyote in size and appearance.



Species Distribution

### Distribution

Prior to the early 1980's, coyotes were common only in western South Dakota and in the counties bordering the Missouri River on its eastern side. Since that time, in response to high coyote populations in the west, coyotes have

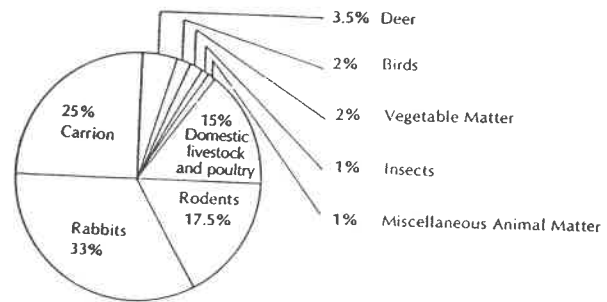
expanded their range to include the entire state. Coyotes are known to inhabit all 48 states in the contiguous United States. The estimated population in South Dakota ranges from 70,000 to 75,000, or an average of nearly one coyote per square mile (2.56 sq. km). The highest density of coyotes occurs along the major river drainages in the state. Coyotes prefer remote areas not often disturbed by humans. However, they readily adapt to human activity when necessary, particularly in areas of urban development. Coyotes are territorial animals. Mature males establish a home range averaging 10 to 20 square miles (25.6 to 51.2 sq. km), while females range over a smaller area.

### Natural History

Coyotes are most active from just before sunset until shortly after sunrise. During cool or cold weather, they may remain active throughout the entire day, if not disturbed by humans. Coyotes bed in sheltered areas and do not use ground tunnels (dens), other than to have their young. Breeding occurs during February and early March, with litters produced about nine weeks later, in April and early May. Litter sizes average 5 to 7 pups, with 15 being the highest number officially recorded in South Dakota. The pups are usually *weaned* by the end of 7 to 8 weeks. They begin to stray from the den at about this time, often accompanying the parents on short hunting excursions. The coyote pups will normally leave the family group in November or December. Often one of the female pups will be allowed to remain with the parents through the breeding season the following year. It is not uncommon for this yearling female to become bred and share the den location with its mother. Usually the litter sizes for this yearling female are much smaller (2 to 4 pups) and the pups are born 1 to 2 weeks later than those of the older female. Coyotes are different from most other animals in that they will mate for life. The male is an active provider for the female just prior to, and immediately following, birth of the pups,

and assists in bringing food back to the den site for the pups. Mortality is highest during the first year of a coyote's life, with few living beyond 12 years of age.

Coyotes mark their territory with urine and will aggressively defend their territory against intrusion by other coyotes. If prey is scarce, coyotes will also remove from their territory other competing predators, such as fox and raccoon. A coyote's diet consists of a wide variety of food. Although coyotes are considered to be *carnivores*, their diet may include wild and domestic fruit and other plant foods. Their diet is regulated in part by seasonal availability and other influences, such as drought and severe winter weather (see Figure 2).



**Fig. 2. An Average Coyote Diet**  
(Data taken by Sperry in 1941 who analyzed stomach contents of 8,263 coyotes from 17 western states.)

### Significance

Coyotes mean different things to different people. To urban dwellers, seeing a coyote in the wild can be a very rewarding experience and a great opportunity for photography. Some Native American literature refers to the coyote as "God's Dog." To the wildlife manager, the coyote is an important component in providing for the management of rodent populations, such as jackrabbits and cotton-

tails. To some livestock producers, the coyote is a serious *predator*, preying on their young livestock.

## **Management Considerations**

With the absence of the wolf, which was hunted to near extinction in the early 1900's in South Dakota, the coyote is now the dominant *predator*, with people being its only real enemy. Disease, such as distemper, hepatitis and mange (parasitic mites) provide a limited amount of natural control of the coyote populations. Fur trappers and hunters pursue coyotes during the winter months for the quality fur the coyote provides. In some areas of the state, these forms of control

have been inadequate in maintaining a population level desired by the agricultural community. A stricter level of control is necessary in those areas where coyotes have caused a problem with livestock predation. This population control is accomplished by trained wildlife managers whose efforts are directed at the removal of the coyotes that are responsible for the damage to livestock.

The coyote's ability to adapt to a changing environment helps assure the species' survival for years to come. They are an exciting and interesting species that will always have the attention of both the public and wildlife managers.

## **Glossary**

**Carnivore** - flesh-eating animal.

**Predator** - an animal that obtains food by killing and consuming other animals.

**Weaned** - no longer drinking mother's milk.

## **References**

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### **Written by:**

Al Miller, Animal Damage Control Supervisor, S.D. Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Pierre, SD 57501. © 1995.

### **Reviewed by:**

Daniel Turgeon, Assistant Animal Damage Control Supervisor, S.D. Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Huron, SD 57350.

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