

Here Comes the Coyote

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“Beep, Beep!”

As children, we would imitate the sound of the cartoon Road Runner, joining in utter delight as the feathered hero once again foiled the often-elaborate plans for its capture by the bird’s arch-enemy, Wile E. Coyote. And the more technologically advanced the scheme to catch Road Runner, and the more awful the outcome for Wile E. Coyote, the harder we laughed.

“Beep, Beep!”

Cartoon animals are never portrayed as they are in real life; too “savage” for young eyes to bear. Let’s start with the footrace of roadrunner vs. coyote. Even going flat out, its body parallel to the ground, using its tail for balance, the real roadrunner barely exceeds 20 MPH, while a coyote can reach speeds double that. Advantage coyote. If we wanted to see this engagement unfold in real life, we in Maryland would have to head west. The roadrunner, a largely terrestrial member of the cuckoo family, ranges no further east than western Louisiana; it is mainly a desert dweller of the U.S. Southwest and northern Mexico. Coyotes, in contrast, range across North America and are now in our backyards. And that is where our real story begins.

It was not until the early 1970s that the first coyote was spotted in Maryland. Since then, coyotes have spread across the state, reaching Montgomery County in 1990. Today, coyotes

are thought to number in the thousands in Maryland alone. Coyotes are believed to be resident in Rock Creek Park and probably live in the Cabin John Creek Park and along the Potomac. With so much small-mammal and bird prey available for their omnivorous diet, coyotes are built to become the suburban wolf, or at least what many biologists more rightly consider as the ecological equivalent of the Eurasian golden jackal, which is a jack of all trades when it comes to eating whatever it encounters. The big question that ecologists ask, and is still unanswered, is what took the coyotes so long to reach Maryland, the Hudson Valley, Cape Cod, or many Eastern locales? There were always plenty of white-tailed deer fawns and small mammals. Why did they take so long to be part of our local fauna?

It is not because they are especially secretive, and thus rarely spotted or counted. People often mistake coyotes for wolves, but coyotes are much smaller. The average male coyote weighs from 18 to 44 lbs. (the female slightly less) while in comparison, the average male North American wolf weighs about 80 lbs. The carnivore biologist Randall Eaton once described the wolf as a pair of jaws with track shoes. The same image can be applied to coyotes who are even faster than wolves although slightly smaller in the jaw department. Coyotes top out at 35 to 43 mph

and wolves at 31 to 37 mph. Coyotes have to be fast because wolves will kill them if they intrude on wolves’ territories or try to scavenge a carcass.

The hostility between wolves and coyotes must have periods of truce, because the emergence of the coywolf, a hybrid between wolves and coyotes suggests some degree of hanky-panky. Coywolves have been sighted regularly in eastern Canada and New England but not in our parts. Coyotes will eat just about anything, including lots of grass, fruits, and even caterpillars in their seasonal diets when birds and small mammals are scarce and no roadrunners are available. Coyotes hunting in packs can even bring down larger prey such as adult deer, although as far as I know,

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there are no reports of them hunting in packs locally.

Has any reader of this column seen a coyote in Cabin John? It would be my joy to end this year of natural history columns on animals that move in the night with my own sighting along 78th St., or down by the Potomac. I hope such a sighting will come soon. Since moving to Cabin John 28 years ago, it has become much more common to hear breeding red foxes vocalize in the backyard. Perhaps some night in the next few years we will hear the soulful sounds of our own resident coyotes. Far more poetic than “Beep-Beep.” **VN**