

# Journal from the James

## Song dogs ...

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Greetings from the James Reserve. In continuing at our peeks into the natural world, this installment will be on another species of mammal found in the James and Idyllwild area, the coyote. I refer to them as song dogs in the title because we not only often see coyotes around our woodland homes but we hear them! Their howling is one of those iconic sounds of the West. No western movie is complete without the campfire and the forlorn howling of coyotes in the distance.

And not surprisingly, this species has figured substantially in the legends and stories of the native peoples. Most native stories depict coyotes as cunning and tricksters. The coyote totem symbolized playfulness, intelligence, joy, being highly adaptable and forming strong family bonds.

But beyond the legends and stories, what are the facts behind the song dog? Well, having studied them for many years, I can attest that coyotes live up to their reputation well. Cunning and intelligent they certainly are. In my attempts to capture them, many times the traps were left empty as clever animals figured out how to trip the trap and steal the bait. Also, if caught, I never recaptured the same animal twice.

However, I think the greatest testament to their intelligence and adaptability is that after hundreds of years of persecution by us, coyotes not only have survived but have thrived. I also have seen ample evidence of their close family ties, male and female working together to raise their litter of pups, keeping the pack together with their "songs."

So coyotes do live up to their centu-



*A coyote pup at Deep Canyon in Palm Desert near the Living Desert. PHOTO BY DR. JENNIFER GEE*

ries-old reputation, which is nice. They are a species we can and have admired for many reasons. However, we often hear the time worn admonition, "Ya, but what good are they? Aren't they just a predator who kills our chickens and other small livestock?"

What good are coyotes? As I wrote in a previous column on mountain lions, predators are not vermin but do have very beneficial roles in the ecosystems in which they live. And coyotes are no exception. As a medium carnivore, at about 25 pounds, coyotes eat medium to small prey. Extensive studies of their diet repeatedly show coyotes are specialists on rabbits and rodents, the same rabbits and rodents we often complain about eating our plants and vegetables. I have estimated that a single coyote could consume up to 3,500 rodents per year. Imagine if those rodents lived and reproduced.

Needless to say, as mountain lions do with deer, coyotes are the guardians of

ecosystems against damage from excess medium and small herbivores. Besides catching live prey, coyotes also scavenge on animals who have died. So they have another role as a cleanup crew, ridding the environment of dead carcasses that could harbor diseases.

Considering everything, we should feel lucky to have the song dogs on our mountain to serenade us with their spirited refrains and maintain the integrity of the environments we call home.

Wildlife watch: Entering into the winter months, we often see coyotes moving along the highway even during the day. The reason for this is that December is the time when pups of the year disperse and moving along roads or trails makes it easier. We will also hear a difference in their songs as the howling shifts in meaning from maintaining family groups to territorial defense of mated pairs who will produce a new set of pups in early spring.