

Outdoors

The irrepressible coyote

“The last man on Earth will have a coyote and a cockroach for company!”

There’s a lot of insight to that old saying. Since Europeans first set foot on this continent, the hand of every man has been turned against the coyote. He has been shot, trapped, poisoned, hounded and persecuted in every way imaginable for centuries. Yet he is not only still with us, he’s thriving, actually expanding his population and his range.

He is the original, the ultimate, the consummate survivor. Next time you hear him yapping at the moon or glimpse him slipping through the brush from your deer stand – or your back door – tip your hat: you are in the presence of one of the most successful mammalian life forms ever created/evolved (take your pick) on the face of this planet.

I like coyotes. More than that, I respect and admire them. They entertain me wherever I find them, which is nearly everywhere. Of course, I’ve never tried to make my living raising sheep, goats or high-dollar exotics in coyote country. I love the sport of varmint-calling and I’ve shot scores – maybe hundreds — of coyotes over the years, but I swore off long ago. These days, I do my coyote-shooting with a camera.

Apparently my slant on el coyote is pretty much the same as the Indians’. They knew the critter better than any city-dwelling white man ever will, and they recognized the coyote’s innate sense of humor and respected his place in nature’s scheme. These are qualities that we 21st-Century Anglo-Europeans may not yet be civilized enough to appreciate. To the red men, the coyote was a clown, a trickster, a happy-go-lucky soul forever playing pranks on other animals.

Indian lore refers to a coyote-badger “partnership” in which the two animals travel together and cooperate in foraging. I never believed a word of it ... until I actually saw it with my own eyes.



Photo by John Wootters

This fine fellow seems to the author to personify the very essence of coyoteness. Here he is, trotting jauntily along with a spring in his step and a twinkle in his eye, looking for fun or something to eat, whichever shall come first. This prime specimen responded to Wootters’ calling in Dimmit County.

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After watching the two animals maneuvering through the South Texas brush, unaware of my presence, I must say that it struck me as a one-sided “partnership” in which the badger didn’t participate willingly. My take on the action was that the agile coyote bird-dogged the badger to snatch any ground squirrel that the badger dug out of its burrow.

That would be consistent with the coyote personality: emphasizing the little prairie wolf’s keen intelligence and opportunism, while at the same time playing a trick on another creature.

The coyote’s IQ is legendary. He is attracted to the shotguns around a dove field in hopes of picking up some unrecovered birds, and I can testify to having rattled up

coyotes while deer hunting. I wouldn’t put it past them to figure out that the sound of rattling antlers is sometimes followed by a chance to clean up entrail piles from field-dressed bucks. The versatile coyote is often seen scrounging shelled corn underneath deer hunters’ feeders, too.

During the ’60s and ’70s, I owned a small ranch in East Texas, in the heart of what was then the territory of the endangered Texas red wolf. The wolves resemble coyotes except for their larger size, but their howling was quite different. Over the 20 years I owned that place, we gradually heard less and less wolf-song and more and more coyote howling, until at last the coyotes had the place to themselves. Whether the coyotes simply bred the wolves out of existence (the two species were so closely related that they could hybridize), or they were just too much competition for their less aggressive cousins, I don’t know, but the coyotes won either way.

Coyotes always win. That’s why there are coyotes

throughout the Atlantic states and the deep South today, places where coyotes had never been heard of when I was a boy. They thrive in prairies and deserts, deep forests and high mountains, on coastal islands, and even inside large cities, where they subsist on pet dogs and cats and occasionally become aggressive even toward small humans.

Perhaps that old saying about coyotes and cockroaches needs revision: the last man on Earth may not last as long as the coyote.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen’s Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy Deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen’s Hunting magazines.