

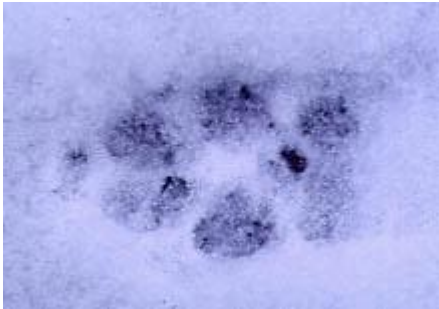
When European colonists arrived on the eastern coast of North America, they found eastern wolves and red wolves, but no coyotes. Native Americans admired wolves, but the animals were relentlessly persecuted by the settlers. The last known wolf in New York state was killed in the Adirondacks in 1899. Coyotes migrated eastward to fill the niche left unoccupied by the passing of the wolves, and these adaptable immigrants are now firmly established in our region.

If you ski or snowshoe in the Hammond Hill area you're likely to encounter coyote trails. In the one I photographed in the area a few years ago (illustration 1) you can see the narrow trail and precise steps that set it apart from a deer trail. When the snow is deep coyotes look for the easiest route.



*Illustration 1: Coyote Trail*

If you're on a ski trail, you might see tracks like the one in illustration 2 running along the same trail you are following.



*Illustration 2: coyote track*

If you're lucky enough to see a coyote, you may be impressed with its size and robust build. (illustration 3) As they made their way east through Manitoba and Ontario, coyotes acquired some wolf genes which gave them larger bodies, stronger jaws, and the ability to hunt in packs. The eastern coyote is now the top predator in our region, and smaller carnivores do what they can to avoid meeting up with one.

When I'm snowshoeing at Hammond Hill I like to follow animal trails, and I occasionally come across a spot where a fisher or red fox encountered a coyote trail. A change in the pattern and some extra footprints tell me about the uneasiness of the smaller predator as it paused to investigate.

Coyotes are ecological generalists, able to consume just about any kind of food, including insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, mammals, carrion, and even plant foods such as fruits, nuts, and even birdseed. The scat shown in (illustration 4) is filled with raspberry seeds--the coyote that produced it must have filled its belly with raspberries. But dietary flexibility should not be taken to mean that the lives of coyotes are haphazard. Their reproductive behavior is finely tuned to maximize the survival of their offspring. Coyotes seek out members of the opposite sex during the winter, often reuniting in the same pairs as in previous years. The two animals hunt and frolic together, mate, mark their territory with scat and urine, and prepare den sites.

In late winter I often come across a pair of interweaving coyote trails, and I'm always cheered by their playfulness and their obvious attachment to each other. When her time comes in early spring, the female retires to the den to give birth and care for her helpless newborns. While she is confined to the den, the male and any of the previous year's young still attached to the family hunt and bring food to her. She may decide to move the pups to a different den, and when this happens the entire family moves with her.



*Illustration 3: Coyote*

At about three weeks the pups begin to venture outside the den, and as they become more active they demand more food. At the same time small mammals are reproducing and more prey are becoming available. At first the adults regurgitate pre-digested food for the young ones, and later they bring small carcasses for the pups to chew on. There's plenty of tussling and mock fighting, and older offspring practice prey-handling techniques with live but wounded prey animals. By

midsummer the family leaves the den, and the young accompany their parents on trips through their territory.



The dens I've found in the Hammond Hill area show the trampling of many small paws and the scattered remains of meals. (If you think you have found the den of any animal, it's best to keep your distance until it has been abandoned so you don't add an unnecessary burden to the hard-working parents.) You may find groups of tracks like the ones in illustration 5, with the small tracks of pups intermixed with the larger ones of their elders. This is when hunting lessons begin in earnest.



Unskilled juveniles clumsily imitate their parents' hunting techniques but still beg food if they're not successful. As the young become more adept they begin to hunt on their own, but they always manage to regroup with the family by answering their melodious yodeling calls and yip-howls. When autumn comes, family ties loosen and the young coyotes may strike out on their own. It's also common for one or two juveniles to remain with their mother. By mid-winter the offspring have nearly attained adult size, and a family group hunting as a pack can take down a weakened deer or one that is struggling in deep snow.

*Illustration 5: Juvenile & Adult tracks*

The journey from newborn to fully capable adult is hazardous, and most offspring do not survive their first year. But many do, thanks to their marvelous adaptations. Their mottled grayish or brownish coats provide camouflage and insulation, and their superb senses of vision, smell, and hearing alert them to what is going on in their surroundings. They can trot for miles and accelerate to speeds of 45 mph for short stretches.

Eastern coyotes are at home in mature forests, scrub vegetation, agricultural lands, wetlands, and even urban areas. They can dig for voles, hunt mice using the stalk-and-pounce technique, ambush rabbits and young turkeys, and gather in groups to pursue deer. By taking up the role of top predator, the eastern coyote has helped to restore balance in our ecosystems, and an encounter with one can renew our own internal balance. There's nothing like listening to a chorus of yip-howls, or feeling the fluid movement in a coyote's trail, to bring us closer to the natural world.