

Coyote Control after Trapping Season

By Gerry Lavigne

In the November/December 2009 issue of the Trapper's Post, I made the case for coyote control as a means of improving white-tailed deer survival at the northeastern fringe of deer range. A key strategy involved fall trapping to add to the natural mortality of coyotes that occurs between whelping season and early fall. As such, canine trappers form the first line of offence leading to coyote control.

"Coyote control" in this case is defined as reducing coyote pack size, including elimination of entire packs, before mid-winter. Coyote efficiency at killing deer is typically low early in the deer yarding period, which usually goes from early December to mid-April. From February on, however, winter-weakened deer often become increasingly vulnerable to coyote predation. Our task is to minimize the presence of coyotes in these yarding areas, and the sooner the better.

Eastern coyote populations will probably decline if their annual losses exceed 60%. In Maine, the combination of early natural losses and fall trapping may amount to 40% of the coyote population. How do we pile on an additional 20% reduction in coyotes (about 4,000 coyotes in Maine) before February? The solution lies with the very deer hunters who stand to benefit.

For more than four decades we've seen our deer populations dwindle, while expecting our state fish and wildlife agencies to address the coyote predation problem. It should be obvious by now to even the casual observer that no state government in the Northeast is going to put into operation a coyote control program. Nor would they be particularly effective if they tried. These agencies are good at restricting doe harvests, and also at avoiding confrontations with the anti-hunting and anti-trapping crowd. If coyotes are to be controlled, it must be done by private individuals and organizations. Rather than relying

on the government to solve this problem, deer hunters need to take greater responsibility for the quality of their hunting experience.

Many hunters have the access, time, and ambition to become coyote hunters. Becoming coyote control agents before, during, and after the deer hunting season will add a new dimension to their hunting experience, and will result in more huntable deer in their local area. Provided they work at it. A big criticism of the concept of deer hunters controlling coyotes is that we only nip at populations, taking only a few here and there. Concentrated efforts, however, are proven to work. If we work at it, good things will happen.

An increasing number of deer hunters are involved in habitat improvement on the land they hunt. Why not add another dimension and incorporate coyote control as well?

Make no mistake about it, coyote control is needed over vast areas of the Northeast, and much of it is remote wildlands. However, we have two things going for us. First, like politics, all coyote control is local. Control coyotes on your back forty, and you may well diminish coyote abundance on the entire 10,000 acres that particular pack occupied that year. Second, deer hunters collectively cover the entire Northeast. Maine alone has 150,000 deer hunters, and they hunt all 900+ towns comprising the 30,000 square miles of deer habitat. We already have the hunters distributed. Now we need to enlist their help in controlling coyotes. If only a few thousand deer hunters killed a couple of coyotes apiece during fall and early winter in Maine, coyote density would be held below current levels most years.

What would coyote control entail for these deer hunters/resource stewards/coyote control free-agents? The possibilities are many and diverse. Most states offer very liberal hunting opportunities. In Maine, coyote may be hunted in daylight year round (Sundays excluded). From mid-December through May, coyote may be taken at night as well.

During fall and winter, coyote respond to well-placed baits such as road-killed deer or butcher scraps. Many Maine coyote hunters hunt from the comfort of strategically-placed shooting shacks. During the night

hunting season, coyote baiters often use dim solar-powered lights to illuminate the bait site. The dim lights mimic moonlight, and coyote adapt to its presence. Speaking of moonlight, the winter lunar cycle from half moon to half moon provides enough illumination to see your crosshairs during most nights on a snowy landscape. Shooting from the upstairs window of my barn at night over snow, I've killed a number of coyotes on a bait in a field at the edge of the woods, about 100 yards out.

If you use an enclosed shooter shack to hunt deer during November, you'd do well to start coyote baiting there also. Placing bait within half a mile of a deer yard can be effective after deer season. An increasing number of outfitters now offer guided coyote hunts during winter in Maine. More outfitters should do so, as a means to control the coyotes in their deer hunting areas.

Deep snow and numerous logging roads make Maine an increasingly popular place to hunt coyote with dogs. Long-legged hounds, or rugged Australian shepherds, effectively traverse deep snow and wear coyotes down after a prolonged chase. GPS units, snow sleds, and strategic placement of hunters on woods roads often prove exciting and effective. Sometimes the dogs get to the coyote first, with lethal results for the coyote. Both outfitters and groups of hunting buddies can be found working coyotes with dogs during winter in Maine. Want to thin out the coyotes in your deer hunting area? Maybe you can hook up with some dog hunters near you.

Another method of hunting coyote involves calling, with electronic or hand-held calls. This method requires some practice and skill, as well as attention to details, like wind direction, camouflage, and movement. One advantage of calling and shooting is that you can cover a lot of ground and go to the coyote, rather than waiting for the coyote to visit a bait. Another advantage is that calling can be practiced at any time of the year. On an October partridge hunt you could spend a few minutes calling yodel dogs. If you're a turkey hunter, switch to coyote calling after noon. Heck, you're already dressed for the occasion and toting a shotgun. Why not extend your hunting day? Incidentally, most coyotes you shoot in May are tending litters. Coyote reduction during April and May can go a long way toward reducing predation losses on deer fawns during June and July.

Finally, don't pass on a chance to harvest a coyote while you're out there hunting other game. Small game and deer hunters often see coyote. Too many pass on killing the coyote for fear of spooking other game. Don't pass on a good shot. Unless the deer are watching you, your shot will not spook them. Literally hundreds of coyotes could be taken by alert hunters pursuing other game.

Do you tend to hunt alone, or do you enjoy networking with other hunters? Coyote hunting lends itself to both approaches. Many coyote hunters I know focus on a single area, typically their deer hunting ground. Although they may go it alone on a bait site, they may belong to one of the coyote hunting associations that are springing up in Maine, and elsewhere in the Northeast.

Group involvement in coyote control has the potential to distribute control effort into more areas, and the wider the distribution, the better chance of achieving control over large areas. The group approach to coyote control is still in its infancy. Here are a few ways to network with like-minded coyote hunters.

In Maine, there are dozens of private fish and game clubs scattered around the state. They meet regularly, and they often hold hunting-related events. Why not consider establishing bait sites and build comfortable shooting shacks on club land? Better still, "adopt" one or more deer yards in the club's area, and locate baits there. Have a sign-up sheet to schedule baiting and hunting time. Hold a club-sponsored contest, with prizes for various categories. Keep records noting success at killing coyotes, and subsequent deer harvest trends. Coyote hunting is fun and challenging. Just the type of activity many fish and game clubs could use during winter.

In Maine there are even more snowmobile clubs, literally scores of them all around the state. Snowmobilers have the equipment to reach even the most remote sections of Maine. Clubs pool their resources to cooperatively maintain thousands of miles of snowmobile trails all winter. Many trails pass near and through hundreds of deer yards. This could be an excellent opportunity for snowmobile clubs to get involved in call-and-shoot, and/or bait-and-shoot coyote control. As with fish and game clubs, snowmobile clubs have their own "territory". Why not

incorporate coyote control into club activities? It just might give snowsledders one more reason to ride!

Many hunters from southern Maine travel into the north woods to ice fish for a few days or a week, out of remote camps. Most of these lakes are near deer wintering areas. Why not bring along some bait and try to kill a coyote or two while fishing, or while lounging around in camp? Several coyote hunters do this already, and they kill their share of dogs.

The North Maine Woods are peppered with old-time commercial sporting camps, some of which have been in business since the late 1800s. These camps were established at a time when deer were very abundant, thanks to old-style logging and the extirpation of the gray wolf. Most of these old sporting camps languish today due to a lack of deer but an abundance of coyotes, and heavy logging. Since the camp cannot be moved, it seems clear that sporting camp owners need to establish their own coyote control program within their hunting area. Some owners already give deep discounts to coyote hunters during winter. Why not also offer free lodging to a trapper or two during the fall canine season?

One final note. If we're going to increase coyote harvests in the Northeast beyond what trappers are now taking, coyote hunters should consider making full use of this renewable resource. Coyote pelts vary in quality, and pelt prices vary quite a bit. Still, coyote hunters should learn to skin and stretch their kills, especially when the pelts are prime during fall and winter. Hunters can probably find a trapper who might be willing to take hunter-killed coyotes, or put them up for them. Tanned coyote hides make great trophies and wallhangers, for a clubhouse or your home. Some taxidermists buy whole coyotes for sale out of their shop. A local taxidermist buys the ones I shoot over bait.

And don't neglect the culinary value of coyotes. After all, coyote meat is just venison one critter removed! Seriously, if skinned and boned soon after its demise, coyote meat is light, like veal, and as versatile as pork. It's great in smoked sausages. I operate a commercial smokehouse for wild game, and everyone thinks my coyote-meat pepperoni "yodel sticks" are delicious. Admittedly, some change their mind when I tell them what they're eating. But that's just irrational bias.

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