



Tales from a
Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

Killing coyotes for the fun of it

The recent coyote slaughter over in the Burns Country is another example of some sportsmen's desires gone haywire. Over the past 100-plus years, stories of coyotes being the worst nemesis of ranchers and farmers have been so blown out of proportion that the minute shooters need a bigger target than ground squirrels, they pick the coyote — all in the name of livestock protection and sport.

Sure, coyotes will kill and eat livestock (so will wolves and feral dogs). That's been going on ever since the wool-growers and cattlemen decided public lands were better for grazing than their own fenced-in back 40. But the presence of predators alarmed the ranchers, and they turned to the government to help them out.

That was when the real trouble started. The wolf was easy to eliminate: the trappers just concentrated on killing pups and moms in dens and trapping family units — bingo! The wolf was gone. That worked so well, the government set out to get rid of the coyote the same way, but it backfired. Instead of killing them off, the trappers just created bigger populations of coyotes, which only became job security for them.

But it did far more than that. The only person that I know of who saw what was taking place ecologically was Aldo Leopold, a quiet

forester from Wisconsin who worked for the Forest Service in New Mexico, and who it considered the "Father of Wildlife Management."

He tried to tell the government and ranchers they were doing it all wrong, both from the methods of killing coyotes (and wolves), plus the long-term ecological damage that would result, but the ranchers and sportsmen had the bit in their teeth. The wolf and coyote had to go.

The sport shooters who participated in the coyote-killing contest earlier this month over in Burns did nothing but satisfy their urge to use their expensive weapons and ammunition to kill something and celebrate their skills. Unfortunately, they left behind an ecological disaster in the sage/juniper steppe ecosystem, the likes of which will out-do the satisfaction the shooters enjoyed.

Then there's the ethics of such events. I take no issue with killing a specific coyote who is doing specific damage to a rancher's livestock — it's an unfortunate consequence of human/wildlife interactions. But it was engrained in me early in my hunting life that what you shoot, you eat.

Sure, I've heard the old sayings about how vicious coyotes can be, but I can say the same thing about my neighbor's dog that got into my chicken yard and killed all my hens. It just seems to me a human being can do better than surrender to the primitive state of having to kill something just for the pleasure of it.

In 1938, the state of Missouri asked the government trapper to leave, and a pretty savvy extension biologist, Bob Smith, taught ranchers and turkey farmers how to remove the particular coyote causing problems, and leave the others alone. The first year that program went into action, deaths to livestock from coyotes dropped



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

There he is, our native coyote, the recent target of sport-shooters who kill them for the fun of it, with the mistaken idea they're doing good.

85 percent.

Coyotes are a different breed of canine than wolves. They just don't think alike; they evolved over different paths and different times. Sure, they're both territorial, the wolf more so than the coyote, but when you poke a sharp stick into coyote culture they fight back. I caught onto this back in 1968.

I was asked by the Defenders of Wildlife to be a watchdog over a government-sponsored coyote-killing project on the Hart Mountain Antelope Refuge that was supposed to enable higher pronghorn kid survival. The Defenders made sure every coyote killed was hand delivered to me and a researcher pal from Reed College to have their stomachs looked into for prey analysis.

We looked at every coyote stomach for a week, and not one trace of a pronghorn kid was found, but we did find ground squirrels and voles in great abundance, competitors for green plants that helped pronghorn kids to grow up and become healthy adults. Which goes to prove, scientifically, that coyotes are doing more "good," than "bad" — most of the time.

Oh, yes, we did find one sage grouse, and I thought the government trappers were going to celebrate all night.

But what also got my eye was a fellow working on a table next to ours. He was removing what appeared to be reproductive tracts of the females, and curiosity finally got the best of us, and we went over and asked what he was doing.

His answer was something like this: "I've been curious for years why the coyote's range has been expanding ever since we started killing them some hundred years ago. I think they've responded by leaving territories and pair-bonding behind and just moving out on the landscape living the life of vagabonds. Now there's one dog (male coyote) running with several bitches

(female coyotes) and instead of having three to five pups, females are giving birth of up to eight."

Then he showed us the multiple ovarian scars on the female's fallopian tubes, evidence that the coyote has been "getting even" for over 100 years of indiscriminate killing that's been going on.

We don't have to pity the coyotes; they can take care of themselves. What we should do is put a stop to the senseless slaying of wildlife to satiate the desire to kill something.

We should adopt what Leopold tried to tell us in 1939: take the coyote out of the hands of what is now the Oregon Department of Agriculture and place them in with ODFW where they can be managed as part of Oregon's wildlife ecosystem.

Common Sense Tip FOR PEDESTRIANS

MAKE EYE CONTACT.

Sometimes, drivers may not notice you, so look to their eyes — they can say a lot about a person's intentions. And walk on!

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