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Coyote sits on lawn (CC BY NC SA Winston Wong)

Coyotes howl to chat with their neighbors

Coyotes are more than an icon of the American West. They are probably your neighbors.

More and more people are routinely hearing coyotes yip, bark and howl in their backyards or in other urban and suburban settings. In fact, *Canis latrans*, the scientific name for coyotes, means “barking dog.”

When you watch coyotes throw their heads back and sing to their heart’s content, they seem to enjoy it. That was Marc’s impression when he and his students studied wild coyotes in the Grand Teton National Park for more than eight years. It’s fun, it feels good, so why not howl?

But what are they saying?

Researchers have identified around a dozen or so coyote vocalizations. Some coyote sounds are used to defend their territory and dens and to tell other coyotes they’re around, but some vocalizations give away much more information.

There’s little evidence that vocalizations are used to coordinate pack hunting. Some research shows the alpha, or high-ranking, males and females and pairs do most of the vocalizing.

Based on extensive and detailed research that involved recording and playing back howls and yips and observing the behavior of captive and free-ranging coyotes, wildlife researcher Philip Lehner 40 years ago placed coyote sounds into three general categories:

Greeting: Sounds include low-frequency whining, wow-oo-wowing (often called a greeting song), and group yip-howling (when reuniting and greeting).

Agonistic: These are vocalizations used during aggressive interactions and when coyotes display submission. They include woofing, growling, huffing (high-intensity threat), barking, bark-howling, yelping (submission and startle), and high-frequency whining (usually given by a subordinate coyote).

Contact: Sounds include lone howling (one of the most common vocalizations), group howling (when reuniting or in response to lone or group howls or yip howls), and group yip-howling (which may announce territory occupancy and may help regulate density of population).

Howling sounds can travel around 1,000 yards and can be used by

coyotes to identify who’s calling, their gender and perhaps their mood. Transient coyotes don’t usually vocalize as much as resident animals in order to avoid interactions. Lone howls can also announce the location of an individual separated from their group.

One interesting and useful discovery is that humans aren’t very good at estimating how many coyotes are around by listening to their howls. Indeed, they usually overestimate the number of individuals actually present. So the melodious cacophony and symphony of sounds shouldn’t be used to claim that numerous coyotes are all over the place.

The more we understand all aspects of coyote behavior, the easier it will be to peacefully coexist with them. We should use what we know to protect them. State and local policies should embrace our understanding of coyote behavior.

We’re fortunate to share our homes with coyotes and other animals, and it’s important that we come to appreciate and understand the fascinating animals with whom we share our magnificent planet.

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