



CENTER LINE

A Publication of Waukesha County's Retzer Nature Center

Spring 2014

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April 21-26

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"Habitat Explorers" June 23-27
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Check out the EE Activity Guide for classes and events offered through the summer!
[EE Activity Guide](#)

Log on to
www.waukeshacountyparks.com
for more information.



SPRING IN THE FORECAST

The date, February 2, 2014. Wisconsin's rodent weather forecaster is about to make his annual appearance. This appearance, I might add, will require much endurance in performance, for this winter has been one record breaking season. The small mammal with the huge burden on his shoulders is *Marmota monax*, also known as the Woodchuck, or the Groundhog. In Ojibwa folk lore, the woodchuck is called otching. In the Cree nation he is called otcheck. In northeastern U.S. and Canada the prognosticator uses both names. February second, named Groundhog Day is his big celebration. On this day, *Marmota monax* comes out from his burrow to make his prediction. Legend reports: if he sees his shadow, he will be frightened and scoot back into his den. Weather wise, the clue is - if its sunny, there will be six more weeks of winter. If the weather is cloudy, he will not see his shadow, and there will be an early spring. Frankly, I would not bet on any of it. Sounds like its all hogwash.



Nevertheless, the woodchuck hibernates until late winter. February second means nothing to him, in the wild. The woodchuck's burrow is mapped out with an up to date hibernating system of tunnels, sleeping areas, and multiple openings for coming in and going out. In these proper living quarters *Marmota monax* resides. He is a chunky mammal with a large head and a small bushy tail. His tail can be 5-7 inches long, head and body average 14-20 inches in length. Nature's sturdy fellows don't venture out of their burrows until late winter. When the exodus happens, all males are really full of themselves. Feisty males battle with each other. Their teeth are weapons of choice. After the sorties, spring time is in the air. Time-out to look for suitable partners. After mating, youngsters will arrive in about four weeks. The offspring are very small at birth. They are blind, hairless, and helpless, but within a month, family life can be seen outside the burrow. The youngsters goof around on the topside of the burrow. Adults sunbathe on the mounds. Several of the woodchucks sit upright on the mounds and act like lookouts for any predators.

Others in the family group will waddle along and chuck up the spring clover, alfalfa, and other spring plants. Spring is found in the forecast. Finally woodchucks are out and about and minding their own business. If I ever ran into Marmota monax in the wild, I would ask an old unanswered question which is, "How much wood would a woodchuck chuck, if a woodchuck could chuck wood?"

Meteorologists (those likable personalities) dealing with our local weather phenomena, developed great pride in their weekly maps and graphics - forecasting cold, colder, and coldest, weeks after Groundhog Day. Two words were finally merged to calm responsibility for the frigid conditions— polar and vortex. OK, I'm not sure how this merger works. Let me check my Webster Collegiate Dictionary for clues.

Polar (a) of or relating to a geographical pole or the region around it.
(b) coming from or having the characteristics of such a region.

That takes the polar listing in hand not much help there.

Vortex (a) a mass of fluid and esp. of a liquid with a whirling or circular motion that tends to form a cavity or vacuum in the center of the action esp: Whirlpool, Eddy.
(b) a region within a body of fluid in which the fluid elements have an angular velocity.

Hmm Sometimes too much information is not helpful at all....

While pondering weather conditions, my favorite weather forecaster is reporting that main Wisconsin roadways are having frost heaves. A new malady to fret over. And how will this affect the bee hives? Spring will bring remedies.

Homebound friends already suffer from iceblink. Too much window gazing over iced fields and streets. Sunglasses are needed to shield the eyes from accumulating icefog. At what ice point does one shout "enough"! Time out to report an unusual fact of no importance, found while sliding around the dictionary.

(Ancient Brits, ruled by Queen Boadicea revolt against the Romans in A.D. 61. They were called the Icenians.)

Interesting fact, but as noted, of no importance.

Not to be put out in the cold, the Vernal Equinox falls on March 20th this year—This is a hopeful Spring forecast. The dictionary helps to complicate this set of events with the explanation of "equinox".

Equinox (a) two times each year when the sun crosses the equator, and day and night are everywhere of equal length.
(b) either of two points on the celestial sphere, where the celestial equator intersects the ecliptic.
These events fall around March 21, and Sept. 23, in the year 2014.

That is a revelation! I will forecast the Autumn Equinox to fall on Sept. 23 in the year 2014.... Hold on, another revelation is in process.

Between now and the next Autumn Equinox, Spring is in the forecast. However, suffering from a severe case of cabin fever sometimes makes me delirious.

Spring in the forecast, is what it is. Spring is an encomium to regeneration, and let's leave it to the birds to signal the revival. American Robins are vocal as they congregate in the Spring scene. Later they will listen for worms beneath the moist dirt. Cedar Waxwings show off their crests, as they rest their wings in local areas among scattered trees. Sociable antics are characteristic of the Cedar Waxwing. It is not unusual to see a row of perched waxwings on a branch, where they will pass a berry down their line, and back again, bill to bill, in some sort of greeting, until one bird will swallow the treat. Cedar Waxwings travel in flocks. Their arrivals and departures are as unpredictable as forecasts of Spring. But when the flock appears in town once again—all is forgiven. Yellow Warblers also are on the move. This species has the largest breeding range of any of the warblers. They like to set up housekeeping in orchards, suburbs, even parks, so one may observe them, or at least hear them. The males are persistent singers, but there are only two melodies in the repertoire. How does (pip-pip -pip-sessewa-is) or (wee-see-wee-see-wiss-wiss-u) sound as a wake up call? A song of praise to the season, I am sure.



Among early spring forecasts listen to the Bobolinks. From every corner of open field or prairie meadow, where the Bobolinks breed, the male voice resonates. He is little, he is loud, and he is beautiful. The breeding Bobolink is black. The back of his head glows yellow. His back and wings are streaked in white. I remember the old farm fields surrounding Retzer Nature Center always resounded with the spring renditions of the Bobolinks.

Leaving the forecasting strictly to the birds, the precursor of the season, or herald of Spring, goes to the male Red-winged Blackbird. His shoulders, adorned with red and yellow epaulets, reveal his rank. Con-ka-ree is his call proclaiming victory over winter, Hurrah—Hurrah. With his tribute, I am ready to believe that spring is in the forecast.... Hopefully, the trails will spring open for all, by the time this article goes to press!

See you on the trails,

Shirley Blanchard

Ref. 1982 Readers Digest North American Wildlife, Pleasantville, New York. Montreal
1977 Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, G.&C. Merriam Co. Springfield, Massachusetts, U.S.A.
2013 –2014 Winter, Observation and suffering



Special Thanks

Jerry Anderson donated a new Garden Wagon to the Ecology Department.

The wagon is much appreciated after equipment was lost in the barn fire



This year, Retzer Nature Center celebrates 40 years.

Established in 1974, the buildings and lands have come along way.

Stop by to see how we have improved with age.

*"Saturday Explorations" programs
you don't want to miss!*

Wildflowers of Spring May 3rd 9-11 am
Home Composting May 10th 10-11 am
Retzer Gardens May 17th 9am-3pm
Wildlife of Wisconsin Streams May 31st 9-11am
Seed Germination June 7th 10am—1pm
Life-ways of Trees June 14th 9-11 am
Native Plant Propagation June 21st 9-11am
Wildlife of Early Summer June 28th 9-11 am



Upcoming Events



EARTH DAY WEEK

APRIL 21-26

Throughout the week, Retzer Nature Center will host a wide variety of activities for the whole family.

Finish off week with our Earth Day finale on Saturday, April 26th.

For more information, go to
www.waukeshacountyparks.com

Retzer's Annual Spring Plant Sale

May 9th

9:00am—Noon

Bring you plant and garden questions— experts will be on hand to help.

Rain Barrels and Compost Bins will also be on sale



Ask the Wildlife Specialist–

By: Dick Bautz

Throughout the year I am often called upon to answer questions from the public - from emails, phone calls and folks stopping at Retzer's front desk. A number of questions about coyotes came from a person living near a large tract of state land that contains forest, wetlands and prairie. Just around sunset in mid-January, several coyotes began calling so loud that they could be heard inside the house. The coyotes apparently had much to talk about because they kept howling for quite awhile. The questions began with, "*---Are these coyotes or wolves? --- Why do coyotes howl? --- Should I be concerned? ---etc.*". I will attempt to answer a list of questions, and also provide some basic information about coyote behavior and ecology. The person who phoned me described the howling as many animals in a sort of wild savage combat with howls, yips, and other indescribable sounds. I answered that these were coyotes, and that strange sound was the classic "Group Yip-Howl" call. The "Group Yip-Howl" usually indicates the presence of one or both members of the alpha pair plus the rest of the pack. If you have ever heard it, you cannot confuse it with anything else. It is quite loud and causes quite a disturbance. Coyotes can howl at anytime of the day or night, but howling occurs more frequently during the crepuscular periods, dawn and dusk. Coyotes are territorial, and they are more social in winter. They use a wide variety of calls to keep in touch, advertise pack strength, lay claim to a new territory, or defend an established territory, and to call the pack to assembly. Coyotes communicate through postures, gestures, tail movements, facial expressions, scent marking and vocalizations. Coyote vocalizations seem to fall within three basic categories, Antagonistic, Greeting and Contact. There are several types under each category, but I will describe a scenario that may explain some of the reasons why coyotes howl. The function of the pack is to support and assist the rearing of the pups, and to protect the home range from competitors. The first is done by hunting and food sharing. The second is done by howling and sometimes fighting.

For the first example, let's imagine one coyote giving a single howl. Next, another coyote gives a howl back. The "Lone Howl" and corresponding return howls are contact calls that are used for regrouping the pack after a hunt, or announcing something of importance such as finding a lost pup, finding a dead deer, or finding another coyote that is not a member of the pack. January through March is a busy time for coyotes, this is their mating period, and some of the coyotes are dispersing out. If one pack wishes to take over another pack's territory, this would be the time to do it. The very loud chorus calls of the "Group Yip-howl" are given to demonstrate the pack's strength, and reinforce their claim to territory. Their intent is that their territory reaches as far as they can be heard. The howling also helps in the spacing out of neighboring packs across the landscape. Coyote vocalizations can be loud or soft, but are meant to get an immediate response. If you are wondering why coyotes need to communicate so loudly or so often, it is because at any given time, there are many unpaired coyotes moving across the landscape. The pack is forever diligent to keep these loners on the move, and these lone coyotes prefer to avoid contact with the stronger packs. These nomads typically do not howl, until they eventually find a mate and establish their own territory, or join another pack. Some just continue to wander. With the exception of winter and pup rearing period, there may be more individual wandering coyotes in the population than coyotes living in pairs or packs.

Chemical communication is also intended to get an immediate response. Scent can be as important as sight or sound. Odor from other coyotes, prey species, larger predators or carrion can be detected from great distances, sometimes miles away, even in the dark. Scent also can last for hours, days or weeks. This is why many species scent mark the boundaries of their territories. Scent marking is a very strong "passive-aggressive" message to -- keep out!



An example of an, “Antagonistic vocalization” could be , if the alpha male coyote comes across the scent of an unfamiliar coyote trespassing through his territory, the alpha male can tell how old the trail is, the direction it is traveling, and whether this stranger is a male or female. Now he has something to howl about. To keep the intruder on the move, the alpha male may give a, “Challenge Call”. This call is a low pitched woof followed by a forceful howl. It means, get out or fight. This in turn could trigger a howling session by the entire resident pack. It could start as, “Lone howls” to call the group together, and then escalate into a, “Group Yip-Howl”. This is the most interesting of all coyote vocalizations. It involves two or more coyotes, giving a complex serenade of yips, barks and howls, The “Group Yip-Howl” can be very loud, and it can last from a few minutes to half an hour or more. It can even sound a bit blood curdling at times, but they are not killing each other, this is the packs cheer, “We are the Champions!”, or as some trappers refer to it, “the Joy of Life Call”. It advertises the packs strength and territory. It also increases pack cohesiveness and like many family gatherings, it affirms the pecking order within the pack. This the easiest way to explain these wild sounds in the night, but in truth, coyote howls cannot be translated into human language. That is why biologists look for patterns of behavior that are associated with specific vocalizations. There is a strong association with howling frequency, pack strength, larger litters of pups, and more pups living to become adults.

“Why does my dog howl when he hears a fire truck siren?” As you already know, dogs, coyotes and wolves all share a common ancestor. This ancestor was most likely a social animal that lived in packs and communicated by vocalization. The best hypothesis is that, certain sound frequencies cause these modern canine species to think they are communicating with another pack member, and give a return, “Lone Howl.” Another reason some dogs howl is when they become lost or are left behind.

“How large do coyotes get in Wisconsin?” Male coyotes can weigh from 30 to 50 pounds, with some individuals reaching 60 pounds. Females are smaller, usually in the 30 pound range, but I have seen several females that weighed over 40 pounds.

“Do we have Coy-dogs in Wisconsin?” Yes. A Coy-dog is a hybrid between a dog and a coyote. How long they persist in a population is another matter. Coyote parents do an excellent job of rearing the young. But dogs are usually less well suited to be a coyote parent, and two things usually happen, fewer pups reach maturity, and over generations, the hybrids with the best survival will leave offspring that look and act like coyotes.



“Are coyotes becoming more numerous?” Yes. Coyotes are intelligent, highly adaptable, and willing to eat almost anything. Most places in Wisconsin that can provide food and cover currently have coyotes.

Coyotes have been successfully increasing their numbers in all states except Hawaii. Coyotes usually have six pups in the spring. The alpha male usually hunts alone and is the main provider for the family. The one-year-old coyotes help with some of the hunting, help watch over the younger pups and act as lookouts for the den site. Several years ago, I have seen an adult coyote followed by nine pups on a farm in Waukesha County. Mortality is highest for the young, but declines as the coyote matures and reaches its prime. After the pups are weaned, the male goes off alone to recoup his strength. The alpha pair reunites as early as December and they are joined by some of the young. Just how many of the young remain with the parents is dependent on food availability and the choice between increasing one’s survival by association with the pack, or leaving and attempting to establish a new pack (or join a different pack).

Those that move out have a better chance of finding a mate, but are also much more likely to die or continue to live outside the boundaries of the stronger packs. Coyotes are born with great survival instincts, but young coyotes that stay with their parents for that second year can learn a lot. Not just how to survive in the wild, but how to adapt to major landscape changes. This is quite a skill set, learning to cross busy traffic, avoiding detection by people, finding food, and continuing to show a growing population.

Even in states with extensive animal damage control programs to stop the depredation on sheep, calves, and other livestock, coyote numbers continue to grow. On the positive side, new methods of minimizing problems have become more common and are both economical and reasonably effective. Specially designed fencing is often very effective. The use of herd protectors like specially trained dogs, Llamas, donkeys and mules are strong deterrents to coyotes in large open grazing situations. But nothing works one hundred percent of the time. Losing livestock and pets is not just a problem in western states like Wyoming and Montana. It also happens in Wisconsin, but more on this later. The person who phoned with the coyote questions was not overly concerned with her personal safety, but she has a dog and a cat. The cat rarely goes outside, but the dog is let out in the backyard daily. She had read of coyote and dog conflicts that did not end well. She asked, *“How can a home owner protect their pets from coyotes?”* The yard was open, but surrounded by woods on three sides. The dog is a schnauzer, small but feisty. I advised that if the dog is kept on a leash with a person nearby there should be no problem most of the time. If the dog is to be left out for longer periods of time with room to roam about, then a double walled fence is needed. Start with a kennel chain-link fence at least eight feet tall, and then surround it with another chain-link fence the same height about three feet outside the first fence. To further increase the deterrent factor, electric fence wires could be attached to the outside of the second fence. When installing the electric fence, it is good to remember that coyotes are very adept at both jumping over and digging under obstacles. Another reason for the double fence is to prevent dog to coyote contact, and transmission of diseases such as mange, distemper, parvo virus, or rabies, to name a few.

“Are coyote packs similar to wolf packs?” Yes, coyotes live in packs, but with similarities and differences with wolf packs. Wolf packs generally live and hunt together. Coyotes sometimes hunt together, but they typically hunt alone, and their hunting /foraging strategies change with the seasons. Coyote packs have an alpha male, an alpha female, and the subordinates are mostly their offspring, just like wolves. And yes, wolves will prey on smaller mammals like rabbits, hares and beaver, but wolves have evolved to prey upon large species like deer, moose, elk and bison.

Coyotes typically hunt smaller animals like rabbits, hares, squirrels, mice, voles, birds, frogs, snakes, and seasonally take advantage of fruit, from wild plums to cantaloupe in a garden. I have also seen acorn shells in coyote scat. Coyotes take advantage of carrion at anytime of the year. Any animal killed or injured by a motor vehicle is fair game for coyotes. The high rate of wildlife-vehicle collisions in many states is a readily available food supply used by turkey vultures, opossums, and coyotes.

“Do coyotes hunt deer in packs?” The short answer is, “Yes”. But first, let’s take a closer look at “Coyote packs”. Like wolves, most coyote packs are family units, and outsiders are accepted based on the need for territorial defense and the availability of prey species. Pack size for Wisconsin wolves is around 6 to 10 individuals. When wolves capture large animals, it is a pack effort. Pack size for eastern coyotes is generally 2 to 5 individuals. Coyotes can kill adult deer, but more often they prey on deer when the deer has a distinct disadvantage such as being weakened by hunger, having an injury caused by a car collision, impeded by deep snow or surprised in an ambush.

Data sets from 2011 thru 2013 of the Wisconsin DNR Fawn Study found that coyotes were the most significant predator of the 139 radio-collared fawns in the Eastern Farmland Regions. Of all the radio-collared fawns, roughly 40% die within the first three months. Coyotes accounted for less than 25 percent of fawn deaths, but the largest mortality factor was starvation at over 50 percent during the first three months. Total survival for the first three months was 58% in 2011, 62% in 2012 and 59% in 2013. Of the 89 collared fawns in Wisconsin's Northern Region bears and bobcat killed more fawns than coyotes.

At one time it was thought that larger coyote packs were needed to hunt larger prey species like adult deer. It is true that subordinate coyote pack members contribute to the chase, but more recent knowledge has found that it is the alpha male and/or alpha female that actually does the killing. The subordinate coyotes, even if present at the time, are not always engaged in this final act. In Yellowstone National Park, coyotes do form larger packs, as many as 10 or 12 individuals, but this is for mutual defense against bears, wolves and cougars when claiming large winter-killed carcasses of bison, moose or elk. Throughout the eastern and midwest states the coyote pack is a rather fluid thing, with individuals often spending more time on their own than together as a pack. The pack will come together during the winter breeding season and remain together until the pups are weaned. They will also come together to defend their home range territory, or when some event causes them to solicit the help of the pack. This is communicated by howling.

“How big is a coyote’s home range?” Coyote home ranges often cover large areas of land, but resource abundance and availability determines just how much territory they need. Some references state 4 to 15 square miles in Wisconsin. In some of the dry western states, coyotes may require as much as 40 square miles of home range. Urban coyotes will use a much smaller area. For an excellent documentary about coyotes in urban areas, check out the PBS program **NATURE** titled: [MEET THE COYWOLF](#). There are around two thousand coyotes living in the greater Chicago area. In the Northeast, Ontario to New York a coyote – wolf hybrid is increasing in numbers. To view this film anytime log on to www.pbs.org/nature/coywolf.

“What sort of trouble do coyotes cause for farmers?” Killing farm animals is not common, but it does occur. Calves, lambs, as well as dogs and cats are opportunistically taken. Most farmers currently take some sort of protective measures. Wisconsin does not keep records of the economic impacts of coyotes on livestock. Because coyotes make a living by killing other animals, young coyotes need to learn these methods or starve. The best way to acquire these essential hunting skills is to practice them as often as possible. This is where coyotes can get themselves into trouble. While the pups are in the sub-adult or teen-age stage, the adult female takes the young to places of opportunity. One such circumstance took place at an organic farm in Walworth County a few years ago. I was doing mammal surveys in the area and was asked for advice. The situation was described to me as: a flock of nearly two hundred free range chickens were reduced to ninety birds in less than a two week period. The chicken coop was on wheels and pulled around the pasture every few days after the cows grazed the grass shorter. The birds returned to the coop at the end of the day and were safe during the night. The coyotes were not seen for the first few days, but dead chickens were found strewn across the field. As the coyotes grew bolder, they could be seen running with chicken-in-mouth during daylight hours. I recommended calling the local Wildlife biologist. The Wisconsin DNR or the USDA Wildlife Services can offer advice or provide a list of professional animal damage control personnel.



RETZER NATURE CENTER

WAUKESHA COUNTY PARKS & LAND USE

S14W28167 MADISON STREET

WAUKESHA, WI 53188

Return Service Requested

Friends of Retzer Nature Center

The Friends of Retzer Nature Center is a registered, 501 (c)3, organization dedicated to encouraging, perpetuating, and promoting the work of conservation and natural resource education.

The organization seeks the involvement of the community in the form of financial and volunteer support to work toward the continued growth and improvement of Retzer Nature Center. If you would like to become a member or view some of our projects and activities, please visit our web site at <http://FriendsOfRetzer.org>.