

Tips and Tactics For Successful Coyote Hunting

By Gerry Lavigne, Sportsman's Alliance of Maine

Coyote predation during winter and in early summer is a serious problem for our deer. With Maine's deer herd at record low levels, especially in the northern half of the state, many hunters are stepping forward to help deer by hunting coyotes. Coyote hunting is challenging, fun, and potentially rewarding. With no closed hunting season in Maine (except Sundays), coyote hunting can really extend your time afield. And if enough of us get into the sport, we may succeed in controlling coyote populations.

Now, a bit about coyote control. No one is seriously advocating the eradication of coyotes from Maine. That isn't possible anyway. However, we shouldn't have to tolerate having coyotes at their maximum population levels, if this harms our deer hunting. What we need is a way to hold coyote numbers down to where fewer deer are lost to these predators. The best time to do this is in the fall and early winter every year. If only 5% of Maine's deer hunters take up the sport of coyote hunting, we could successfully reduce coyote populations and improve deer survival.

Many hunters have already gotten into coyote hunting. Some call and shoot, some hunt over bait, and some hunt with dogs. Coyote hunting is also catching on with outfitters. A growing number of Maine guides now offer coyote hunts after deer season. Coyotes may be targeted as the sole quarry of the day's hunt, or they may be taken incidentally while hunting partridge, hare, turkeys, or big game. And don't overlook the night hunting season for coyote, which opens December 16 and ends on August 31!

Most Maine coyotes range from 25 to 50 pounds. Any caliber rifle that works for deer will down a coyote. However, for long distance shooting, many coyote hunters use the smaller, flat-shooting calibers such as the 204, 22 Mag, 22-250, 222, 223, and 243. Sometimes coyotes are encountered within shotgun range. Number 4 buckshot is the recommended load for anchoring a coyote; "T" shot is probably the smallest you should use.

A good quality variable power scope like a 3-9 with a large diameter objective lens provides good target imaging in low light out beyond 100 yards. Although pricey, night vision scopes give the coyote hunter a major advantage on dark winter nights. Some coyote hunters outfit their rifle with attached infrared designators, red or green lasers, or tactical flashlights muted by a green or red lens. The use of shooting sticks steadies the rifle for those long distance shots.

Shooting over bait is the most popular method of hunting coyotes in Maine at this time. Dedicated baiters can be highly successful, if they "put in their time". Annual kills of 2 to 5 coyotes are common, but kills ranging from 10 to 50 coyotes are taking place out there. Coyotes respond best to natural baits, such as deer, moose, and beaver. However, they may also readily respond to butcher scraps, and livestock carcasses. Coyotes, fox, crows, and ravens will quickly scatter loose bait, so tie it down or freeze it into heavy chunks during winter to make it last longer. Keep bait consistently available. But remember, don't just bait & feedn coyotes -- shoot them!

Comfort and convenience are important to success when shooting coyotes over bait. Coyotes initially may show up at your bait at a particular time of day, often between dawn and mid-morning. But once a kill or two is made, the remainder of the pack will become more secretive, often becoming nocturnal. So, you may find yourself spending a lot of time in the waiting mode. Best to dress for the weather and be patient. Many coyote baiters shoot from a barn loft at home (where legal), or from a camp, ice shack, or a custom-built "shooter shack", all of which can be heated. Some hunters build cubbies out of fir boughs or snow for concealment and protection from the wind. The same tree stand you rely on for deer hunting may be put to good use at a coyote bait. Silence is the rule when approaching or occupying a shooting stand. Coyotes have keen hearing, and they may be laying up nearby.

Coyotes are naturally wary around man-placed baits. Baits should be placed a minimum of 100 yards from your stand. If you can reliably hit at 200 yards, all the better! Coyotes feel more comfortable when approaching a bait near cover, so place baits at the edge or just inside the woods where you can still see to shoot. Keep a safe backdrop for your shot. Don't overlook the night hunting season, particularly during the moon period. You can reliably see your crosshairs on a moonlit night with snow covering the ground. Coyotes are less wary at night, so you may be able to place bait closer and more in the open for night hunting. Bait hunters may use a number of devices to alert them when a coyote is at the bait. These include remote cameras and infrared alarms. Some hunters shine dim, solar powered lights on the bait, for use during the dark of the moon.

Coyotes respond readily to a dying rabbit call or a fawn bleat, and many hunters find calling and shooting an enjoyable sport. Locate fresh coyote activity and call sporadically for 30 minutes or more at each location, using either hand-held or electronic calls. Dress to blend in with the landscape, select a site with good visibility, but conceal yourself. Play the wind -- coyotes like to approach into the wind. Use of a decoy rabbit, and/or remote speakers may help fool that wary coyote. After shooting a coyote, remain still and continue to call. A second or third coyote may come into sight.

A small, but very dedicated group of hunters has mastered the art of hunting coyotes with dogs. Coyotes habitually cover a given area, and they can be chased in front of strategically-placed hunters, particularly in deep snow. Over the course of the winter, dog hunters can kill dozens of coyotes. Large aggressive hounds or even Australian shepherds are released over fresh coyote sign, and the chase is on! A good road system, snowmobiles, and radio collars on the dogs improve success. Use of dog hunting may be an effective way to quickly reduce coyotes in and around deer wintering areas in Maine.

Finally, don't overlook the value of coyote pelts. Coyote fur is marketable from October to early spring, and the pelts are used for fur clothing and trim. Learn to skin and prepare your coyote pelts, or hook up with a trapper, fur buyer, or taxidermist who may buy them from you.

Coyotes are a valuable and renewable natural resource. They have the potential to provide a great amount of hunting opportunity, and they can contribute to the economic well-being of rural Maine. Take responsibility for the quality of your deer hunting experiences. Add coyote hunting to your outdoor recreational activities this year!