

*Notes From The Shooting Shack.....*The Saga of Henry The EighthBy Gerry Lavigne

This is the story of Henry VIII. No, not the long-ago king of merry Old England. This Henry is a big, mature Eastern Coyote that frequents my small farm in rural Piscataquis County, ME. To say that Henry has been unlucky with the ladies for most of his life is an understatement, as you'll soon learn. Henry's story is a case study in local control of coyote populations, and our interactions have revealed some interesting biological observations.

I am a coyote hunter, and have been since the DIFW suspended the coyote snaring program in 2003. From August to April each year, I maintain one to three bait sites at the end of one of my fields and on into one corner of a beaver meadow. From the comfort of my perch in the loft of my barn, I am able to shoot coyotes that may visit my baits day or night (when legal to do so, of course). My closest bait is 110 yards, one of my best is 190 yards, and I occasionally work a bait at 240 yards.

I hunt with a rifle chambered in 223 Rem. My current rifle is a better match to my particular shooting eye and since I've owned it, I seldom miss. This wasn't always the case; experience and the right equipment both improve hunting efficiency. My son-in-law, Jason, has recently taken up coyote hunting, and like me, he's finding there's a learning curve.

Over the past decade, I've taken 2 to 5 coyotes per year over the home bait. While that level of coyote removal probably reduced the population a bit in my town, during the first 6 years, there always seemed to be a fresh pack at the bait each fall. I wasn't having an impact in preventing reproduction among the coyotes that called my farm home. By 2010, that all seems to have changed.

Eastern Coyotes are highly territorial. Pair bonding and mating occur from late January through February. Mated coyotes establish and defend territories as large as 10 to 15 sq. mi. (6,000 to 10,000 acres). Pups are born in April, after a gestation period of 63 days. Coyote packs consist of the mated pair, their current offspring, and occasionally a yearling offspring or two that hasn't yet dispersed. If a hunter fails to kill the mated female after the February mating season, there will be a fresh pack on the bait come fall. But what would happen if the female is killed, but the dominant male remains alive? I found out starting in the fall of 2009.

That fall started out like most preceding years. I shot a juvenile in October and one in early December. During early winter 2010, I got my first look at Henry. At that time, he must have been at least 2 years old, because he was the dominant male that year. I educated Henry with a clean miss in broad daylight. He proved to be a fast learner, for I never saw him again that year. He and his mate did manage to help themselves to my bait while leaving tell-tale sign in the vicinity. My last shot in April 2010 took the life of Henry's mate (and her litter of seven near-term pups). From there, it got interesting.

Henry seems to have stayed local, and he has maintained his territory continuously over the next three breeding seasons. Each year starting in late January, Henry would disappear for a week to ten days, only to return with a mate. Because she is naïve to the bait situation, I am typically able to see and kill her.

In all, I have killed 8 of Henry's mates since April 2010. All of these females were in the 30 to 38 lb. range, which puts them in the yearling and older category (not pups). The last seven (2 in 2011, 3 in 2012, and 2 in 2013) were all taken between late January and late February, at the height of the pairing and mating season.

Henry is probably not too happy with me at this point! He is cagey, cunning, adaptable, and a survivor -- so far. He's rarely seen in daylight. He avoids the closest bait site, though his tracks can be seen in the alder tangle nearby. My son-in-law had a crack at him at 230 yd. in February 2012, and like me, only educated Henry. And in February 2013, Henry stepped out in the first rays of dawn at 190 yards before Jason could see his crosshairs. Henry lived, but his 32 lb. mate wasn't so lucky, when she stepped out 20 minutes later. I got a look at Henry for about 3 seconds during February 2011, when he strode into sight, sniffed at the bait, turned tail and departed. No shot.

My most memorable sighting of Henry occurred in late February 2013. After we killed 2 of Henry's mates in late January and mid-February, Henry returned not only with a female, but also with a couple of rival male suitors. Among coyotes, the female actually selects her mate. But until she does so, she's apt to attract every unattached male in the area, just as domestic dogs do. Early one late February morning, I watched a smallish coyote enter the 190 yd. bait, and then quickly disappear to the left. A few seconds later, another coyote emerged from the right on the edge of the meadow at the 190 yd. bait. At the same time, none other than Henry himself eased into the alders and was barely visible 30 feet into the thicket. Should I try to thread a bullet into the alders, or take the open shot? I chose the latter, and dropped a beautiful 38 lb. male. Did Henry sucker his competition into committing suicide, or was this coyote simply naïve to the bait and a bit distracted by the nearby female in heat? Interestingly, I killed another male coyote, a 32 pounder, on the 110 yd. bait a few days later. Powerful attractant, that estrus.

Henry is a big coyote, probably in the 45 lb. range. He tends toward the rufus color phase, while retaining a good deal of dark pelage on the shoulders, and back. He demonstrated his territoriality rather viciously early this past winter. During late November, 2012 I killed a 43 lb. male at another bait 8 miles away. After pelting this coyote, I tossed it onto my bait site at home. For the next 6 weeks, this carcass remained untouched. But in mid-January, Henry dragged it off the pile, and though he didn't eat it, Henry seemed to thrash that carcass something awful. Every few nights, the carcass was dragged another 20 feet and roughed up some more until little remained of it. Since the dead coyote still had its feet intact, Henry probably sensed it was a mature coyote and therefore a competitor. And as the breeding season emerged, Henry's rising testosterone level likely made him less and less tolerant of that critter -- dead or not!

After depriving Henry of eight mates, he may have sneaked one by me this year. Henry's big tracks are evident in my woodlot, and there is a smaller set accompanying his. For the first time in 4 years, Henry may have a pack to accompany him in his territory. Job security for a coyote hunter. In the meantime, my part of town has seen reduced coyote abundance, and I know there are more deer here than in many other parts of WMD 18. Looks like the saga of Henry VIII will continue for a while longer, at least.

[Retired in 2005 after 30 years as DIFWs deer biologist, Gerry Lavigne now leads SAM's Deer Management Network and serves on SAM's Board of Directors.]