

Urban Coyote

Billy tiptoed down the stairs of his grandparents' house. He was thirsty. After helping himself to a bottle of water, he sat down at the kitchen table. The moon shone through the picture window. He peered out into the backyard. Something was by the trashcans!

What is that? Billy wondered. It looked like a big dog. Maybe the dog was lost.

"Grandpa, Grandpa! Wake up! There's a lost dog in the backyard," Billy tapped his Grandpa on the arm.

Grandpa followed Billy into the kitchen and gazed out the window. "Why Billy, that's no dog. That's a coyote."

"A coyote...what is a coyote?"

"A coyote is a wild animal, Billy," Grandpa explained. "Now go back to bed and I will tell you all about coyotes over breakfast in the morning."

Billy bounded out of bed as soon as the sun was up. He loved staying at Grandma and Grandpa's house. Their house in the Texas Hill Country had a big backyard full of trees to climb.

"Morning, Billy! Grandpa told me you saw a coyote last night." Grandma pulled a few plates out of the kitchen cabinets.

"Yes Grandma, it was BIG and it was getting into the trash!" Billy's excitement from the previous night came rushing back.

"I don't think it was getting in the trash," Grandpa chimed in. "Usually trash is the last resort for food for coyotes. I suspect he was after the rodents that hang out by the trash."

"I like that coyote," Grandma said.

"What else do coyotes eat, Grandpa?"

"They mostly eat small animals, like squirrels, rabbits, and rats," Grandpa replied. "They also eat fruits and berries. Coyotes are smart. When I was growing up, they had a cartoon character named Wile E. Coyote. The name was pronounced like the word 'wily', which means clever."

"Where did the coyote go?" Billy asked.

"Well, coyotes are mostly out at night. That's usually when they hunt, although they hunt during the day, too. I suspect that coyote went back home."

"Hey, Grandma! Instead of bunny pancakes, can you make coyote pancakes today?" Billy grinned.

"Well, I can certainly try...but only if you and Grandpa howl like a coyote for them!"

Grandpa started howling and Billy joined in.

"Ok, ok boys!" Grandma laughed. "Coyote pancakes coming up!"

"Grandpa, how much does a coyote weigh? Do coyotes have babies? Where is the coyote's home?"

"You sure are full of questions, Billy!" Grandpa teased. "I tell you what after we finish the chores Grandma has for us, let's go to the library. Maybe we can find a book about coyotes."

"What a great idea, George," Grandma placed plates full of coyote pancakes on the table. "My friend Mary is working today. I am sure she can help you find a delightful book."

Grandma shooed the boys outside to plant her favorite flowers in the garden. They were almost finished when Grandpa suddenly stopped and called out to Billy.

"Why Billy, look here! It's a coyote track in Grandma's flower bed. See here? A coyote's footprint is much less rounded than a dog's footprint. His paw print is also longer and oval-shaped."

Billy traced the footprint with his finger.

"Better not tell Grandma the coyote was in her flower beds." Grandpa winked. "Alright, that's the last of the flowers to plant." He brushed his hands on his pants. "Let's go in, get cleaned up, have some lunch, and head to the library."

A friendly voice rose from behind the library shelves: "Well hello George! Hi there, Billy. Your Grandma told me that you are looking for a book about coyotes. Let's walk to the back and see what we have."

After scanning a few rows of books, Mary grabbed a book from the shelf. "This looks like a good one."

"Thanks, Mary," Grandpa said. "Billy, what do you say we go get an ice cream and see what we can find out about coyotes in this book?"

"Awesome!"

"Don't tell Grandma though." Grandpa put his finger to his lips. "She wouldn't want us to spoil our dinner."

Grandpa ordered his favorite chocolate chip mint ice cream and Billy ordered the chocolate-vanilla swirl.

Billy and Grandpa slipped into a booth and flipped through the book. "Look here, Billy: it says that coyotes live either alone or in small packs of up to six coyotes. They have a keen sense of hearing, sight, and smell. A coyote's main predators are wolves, cougars, and humans."

"Why would a human hurt a coyote, Grandpa?" Billy frowned.

"Because they are scared. Maybe they have a farm and the coyote is eating the farm animals, so they decide to take action. It says here that coyotes rarely attack humans and are rarely a threat. If you feel threatened by a coyote, throw small stones or sticks to scare it off or spray it with a hose."

Grandpa turned the page. "Coyotes weigh about forty pounds, and they can travel speeds up to forty miles per hour."

"That's fast!" Billy exclaimed.

"Sure is. They can also jump thirteen feet. And they are excellent swimmers."

Grandpa scanned another page. "Here is the answer to your question about babies: Coyotes give birth to pups in the spring. They may have a litter of anywhere from three to twelve pups. They live in a den. This is interesting. Coyotes rarely build their own dens. They usually take over an animal's previously established den, like a skunk, and then they change the den to fit their family."

"Coyotes really are clever!" Billy scooped up a spoonful of ice cream.

Grandpa continued. "Coyotes are part of the Canidae family. They are related to wolves, dogs, foxes, and jackals. Their scientific name is *Canis latrans*, which means barking dog. Coyotes are native to North America. They have a variety of sounds besides howling. They also bark, growl, yip, and have high-frequency whines."

Billy barked and howled in response.

Grandpa glanced at his watch. "Oh boy, look at the time. We better get home to Grandma, she will be wondering where we are. Remember, no telling Grandma about the ice cream!"

"I can't wait to tell her all about coyotes!" Billy squealed.

"Grandma, Grandma!" Billy yelled as he flung open the front door. "We learned so much about coyotes!"

"That's great, Billy." Grandma wiped her hands on the dishtowel. "Go wash up for supper and you can tell me all about it at the dinner table."

Billy took his seat at the table. "Grandma, did you know that a coyote mom and dad stay together for life? Just like you and Grandpa, but they only live 10-12 years."

"Well, that's not nearly as old as us!" Grandma chuckled. "What else did you find out, Billy?"

"Coyotes are good for the - what's that word, Grandpa?"

"Environment... they are an important part of the ecosystem."

"That means they help keep wildlife in balance," Billy chimed in.

"Dottie, will you please pass the mashed potatoes?" Grandpa pointed to the bowl to her right.

Grandpa heaped mashed potatoes onto his plate. "We also found out that coyotes self-regulate their own population based on the number of coyotes in their territory. If the population is low, they have more babies. If it gets too high, they have fewer."

"Yes, and the babies are called pups just like dogs," Billy added. "And just like dogs—they keep cooler by panting."

Billy wasn't finished. "Coyotes are very clever, Grandma! They sometimes walk on their tiptoes to make as little noise as possible."

"Wow, that is clever! You boys sure learned a lot today. Why don't you help me clean up? Then you need to brush your teeth and go to bed, Billy. You've had a full day!"

Later, in his room, Billy had a simple wish. "Grandpa, will you tuck me in bed?"

"Of course, good night, Billy." He tucked Billy in and then planted a kiss on his forehead.

"Good night, Grandpa. I'm going to count coyotes instead of sheep tonight!"

"Maybe you will dream of coyotes. Love you, Billy."

"Love you too, Grandpa."

"Night, Night."