

Coyote Derbies -- Sporting Events or Wildlife Management Tools?

by Gerry Lavigne

Coyote derbies, also known as coyote contests or tournaments have been around for a while in Maine. They are privately sponsored events organized by hunters, often in partnership with businesses. Their purpose is to generate participation in hunting and trapping of coyotes with the expectation that increased coyote harvest will lead to improved deer survival.

Coyote derbies in Maine got their genesis soon after the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife (DIFW) abandoned its long-standing coyote snaring program in 2003. At that time, DIFW was faced with a pending lawsuit by anti-hunting zealots who claimed that coyote snaring threatened Canada lynx survival. This all took place just 3 years after the US Fish and Wildlife Service placed the lynx on the Endangered Species list throughout its range in the contiguous 48 states.

At the time, hunters in the northern half of Maine were furious with DIFW for abandoning all efforts to reduce coyote predation on deer. But rather than merely griping about the situation, Maine hunters took decisive action. If the State was unwilling to protect deer, the people who had a vested interest in a thriving deer resource would undertake the effort themselves. At this point, northern Maine hunters transitioned from consumers of the deer resource to co-managers of that economically and culturally important natural resource. They got to work hunting and trapping coyotes during fall, winter, and to a certain extent spring.

Initially, much of the effort to increase coyote harvest was done individually. Hunters learned to hunt over bait, or to call. Others developed dog kennels dedicated to hunting coyotes. There was and still remains a need to disseminate information on hunting tactics best suited to our Maine coyotes. This led to the formation of a few private organizations dedicated to promoting coyote harvest, along with deer habitat improvement.

The first such organization was founded in Washington County around 2005. The Washington County Conservation Association lasted only a few years during which time they held some of the first coyote derbies in Maine. Though the organization did not persist, the effort Downeast was taken up and expanded when the Penobscot County Wildlife Conservation Association was formed in 2008. The PCWCA held its first coyote derby during the 2009/2010 winter, and it continues to this day. This organization has participants in northern Washington and north-central Penobscot Counties. Ground zero for the PCWCA is Springfield, ME.

Concerned hunters in Aroostook County also organized in 2008 with the formation of the Aroostook County Conservation Association (ACCA). The ACCA has hosted a coyote derby each year since 2009. The ACCA also places great emphasis on improving deer habitat in addition to controlling coyotes. Some of the organization's time and funds are spent developing food plots, planting cedar trees, and providing supplemental feed. More recently, ACCA is partnering with the Department and SAM to locate deer wintering areas for purchase and future management by the Department. ACCA holds regular meetings over the course of the year, and they meet in Presque Isle.

While the PCWCA and the ACCA are the two premier coyote derbies currently operating in Maine, several others have been held since 2003. One such derby was held in Houlton for four years around 2010, sponsored by Mac's Trading Post. That derby seems to have been absorbed by ACCA and PCWCA. Hunters in the Rangeley area also have demonstrated concern for coyote predation on deer. The activities by the Rangely Guides Association have included promotion of coyote hunting during winter. Concerned hunters in the Bingham region ran a coyote derby for 4 years starting around 2010. In central Penobscot County a coyote derby was organized in 2014 and 2015. Another derby came on line during 2017 in central Somerset County.

In the 15 years they have been operating, the PCWCA and the ACCA have racked up some impressive coyote harvests. The PCWCA has accounted for 2,152 coyotes in 15 seasons, ranging from 80 to 255 per season, for an average of 144 coyotes per winter.

The ACCA has fared as well. After a couple of limited trial years which yielded 37 and 57 coyotes, The coyote kill registered by the ACCA has averaged 135 coyotes per season (range of 86 to 209 coyotes). Over 15 seasons, the ACCA has removed 2,021 coyotes from the deer woods of Aroostook County.

The recipe for success for both organizations is similar. Be an active, mission-oriented organization that attracts and holds loyal participants and officers. Allow all legal methods for coyote harvest (regulated trapping, bait, calling, hounding). Provide ample time to harvest and register coyotes. PCWCA runs from December 16 to March 31. ACCA runs from October 15 to mid-February. Provide a positive financial incentive to participate.

Both organizations charge a participation fee (\$20) and, as non-profit 501(c)3s, they solicit money and prizes from area businesses. Each season, a substantial reward is paid for the largest male, the largest female, and a random drawing. All remaining money in the purse is paid for each coyote entered. [ACCA does hold some funds out to pay for seed and nursery stock.] Because each coyote registered has a value, hunters and trappers have a financial incentive to succeed, beyond altruism and the potential value of the pelt. Over the years, payout per coyote has varied from \$10 to \$25. Both organizations have a few hunters who personally rack up 20 to 45 qualifying coyotes annually.

These coyote derbies are sometimes criticized for putting a price on dead coyotes, i.e. they are a bounty. Yes they are a form of a bounty system -- a privately funded bounty system that is specifically targeted at a problem area, at a specific time of year, using legal hunting and trapping methods, for the purpose of improving the quality and economic impact of deer hunting. The participants and organizers of these derbies have developed a thick skin; they don't wilt under criticism from individuals and groups who harbor the larger agenda of ending hunting and trapping altogether. It is a perfectly legitimate idea to suppress one population (coyotes) to favor another, more highly valued population (deer) to provide greater societal benefits.

Those who consider coyote derbies unethical and not a valid wildlife management tactic should look to the Moosehead Lake togue fishing derby. About 15 years ago, DIFW decided that the big lake was severely overpopulated with togue (lake trout). Because of high togue populations, the highly-valued landlocked salmon fishery was being severely limited as

togue gobbled up a dwindling supply of smelt. The smelt, of course was an important prey fish for both the togue and the salmon. DIFW's solution was to **organize and co-sponsor** an ice fishing derby designed to reduce the togue population. The Moosehead Lake togue derby remains an annual success to this day. Togue populations are suppressed, there is more forage for salmon, and the salmon fishery has improved. DIFW is still a co-sponsor, private businesses still fund this "togue bounty", and no one questions the ethics of suppressing one species to favor another. More recently, DIFW is sponsoring another annual togue derby, this one focuses on Sebago Lake. Go figure!

Since 2010, SAM has focused on ways to promote deer recovery throughout Maine. Our mission is three-pronged: improve habitat, encourage predation management, and support biologically sound deer hunting regulations. In this context, we fully support the efforts that the PCWCA, ACCA, and other organizations have made toward deer recovery in Downeast and Northern Maine. And we look forward to working with them to suppress coyote populations where needed.

So, yes. Maine coyote derbies are popular sporting events, but they are also a valuable and cost-effective wildlife management tool. In the next edition of the SAM News, I'll explore their effectiveness in improving deer survival and subsequent deer harvest.

[Caption: A brace of coyotes shot over bait during the winter of 2020. Coyote derbies incentivize coyote hunters to get out in the cold during the long Maine winter. In doing so, they may well be improving deer survival in their area. G. Lavigne photo.]