

## 'There is a little bit of wolf that got into them'

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Is the Eastern coyote really a wolf hybrid?

Biologists increasingly are convinced that the Eastern coyote combines the DNA of coyotes and wolves.

For starters, Eastern coyotes typically weigh 33 to 47 pounds, making them far larger than the Western coyote, which weighs between 22 and 30 pounds.

On the Cape, one female coyote weighs in at 55 pounds, according to field biologist Jonathan Way of Marstons Mills, who uses radio tracking to study the animals.

In Vermont, a stuffed wild canine belonging to the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife in St. Johnsbury weighed 72 pounds at death and was built like a wolf. Genetic testing showed it was a coy-wolf, with nary a hint of domestic dog, according to a report in the Caledonian Record.

Way hopes to have some answers about the pedigree of Eastern coyotes in Massachusetts sometime soon. He has sent the DNA of more than 50 of the animals to a lab in Ontario and anticipates receiving results this summer.

If genetic testing proves that the local coyote is actually a coy-wolf, it would be a new animal for the Cape ecosystem.

Scientists believe there were few, if any, coyotes in New England during Colonial times and that big timber wolves were also scarce.

What may have existed on Cape Cod is a type of red wolf similar to a species found in Canada. It's possible that the Cape's coyotes contain some mix of coyote and red wolf DNA.

But "wolf hybrid" may be too lupine a description, implying as it does equal parts coyote and wolf, said Colleen Olfenbittel, fur bearer biologist for the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife.

A likely scenario is that more than 100 years ago coyotes heading east passed through Canada and bred with the red Algonquin wolf, according to Olfenbittel.

"There is a little bit of wolf that got into them," she said.

Testing so far - such as that being done by the state of Maine - is inconclusive, she said. Massachusetts officials hope to have more knowledge of coyote genetics by the end of this year.

"I wonder if public sentiment will change if the Eastern coyote is soon officially recognized as a wolf," said Way, who pointed out the federal government protects wolf populations.

"The word 'wolf' and 'coyote' seem to mean two completely different things to many people," Way wrote on his Web site.

"In reality, they are very similar creatures."

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