

Stand And Deliver:

10 Tricks You Can Use To Be A Better Coyote Hunter

By Dave DiFranco



"Professor" Rick Holdaway (left) and the author display the product of back-to-back setups. The author shot the coyote Rick is holding face on at 186 yards. The bullet went into its mouth and down its gullet without so much as chipping a tooth. No pelt patching required.

I was talking to professional coyote hunter Rick Holdaway who was making a point about how hard it is to defeat the natural senses of the coyote. I don't know the source of his quote, but he said, "A feather fell from the sky. The eagle saw it, the bear smelled it, the deer heard it, and the

coyote did all three before the others."

A gift for survival, you bet. The best way to get around these formidable natural defenses is to outsmart them. The coyote's biggest flaw is that he is an empty stomach on fleet feet. Knowing something about his behavior will help a beginning predator



Larry Day used his .223 Browning to score a hat trick. The best reason to hunt with a friend: Coyotes are just as likely to circle downwind and come through the backdoor. A pal can act as the reception committee and increase the bag significantly. Teamwork works for both coyotes and hunters.

hunter score and an experienced hunter score more often. Here are some tips that may help when setting up your next stand.

1. BE NATURAL



The evening walk back to the truck is made easier by a successful day and the gift of a blaze orange sky. It is at moments like this that the faint blare of the hunter's horn sounds the loudest.

I doubt that any predator hunter would go out hunting wearing a white T-shirt, Bermuda shorts, and a Panama hat, but some hunters wear clothing that is just as obvious to a coyote. I actually have seen a hunter wearing full camouflage with short pant legs that showed his white socks above his ankle-length boots. That is like wearing a "Kick me" sign to a coyote.

Wear camouflage clothing appropriate for the area you are hunting. It is not the best plan to look like a tree in a Virginia forest when sitting in a sage flat without a tree for miles around. Use colors and patterns that blend in as much as possible.

Don't forget to cover your hands. Although it is a good rule to move hands and head as little as possible, predator hunters routinely

make head movements to look around the area, move hands from binocular to rifle, or reposition their rifle for a shot. The reflective surface on the back of a human hand is like waving a flag to a coyote. Cover up your hands to help mask necessary movement.

I know some exceptional hunters who don't cover their faces. The jury is still out on this point. I usually prefer to use a net attached to a hat to accomplish this task. I have seen all sorts of hats, from the traditional baseball type to the slouch hats. I have had success with both types as a method of breaking the human outline. The point is to utilize clothing that blends in as much as possible and distorts the human form.

2. DON'T STINK UP THE PLACE

Just because nature calls doesn't

mean you have to answer it. If you have to go, go where you parked the truck and not anywhere while walking to or near a setup. If you are a smoker, coyotes probably have smelled you since you left the house. Burned tobacco is a very strong, unnatural odor that will tip a predator to your presence farther away than most satellite phone connections. If you're serious about this sport, consider foregoing that smoke. Think of all the ammunition and gear you could buy if you didn't smoke anyway.

Watch your back trail. I recall calling a coyote that was coming like his tail had spontaneously ignited. He crossed my back trail where I came into the stand and almost turned himself inside out trying to reverse his course. Coyotes can pick up scent where humans have walked with no effort at all. Some hunters use scent reducing rubber boots, but I have no experience with them. I'm just very careful how I set up in a stand. I consider the way the wind is most favorable and how the predator is least likely to approach. I personally don't use cover scents so I can't provide any information on their effectiveness. As far as detectable, unnatural scent goes, less is better.

3. WATCH YOUR BACK

I always try to keep a bush or tree that is taller than I am at my back when I am seated to break up my outline. I have found that back cover is more important than front cover. When the sun is on one side of the bushes, consider moving into a shadow on the other side of the bush.

Always use back cover and shadow to your advantage. One time I was in a setup with two of my friends who had no cover larger than a 6-inch tall bush. We used what was available by lying on our backs and were rewarded when a pack of six coyotes showed up at one time.

4. LOOK AT THIS

Two types of decoys are effective when calling predators. Predators responding to a call expect to see what they came for. Give it to them. Once spotted, a determined coyote will not take his eyes off the prey on the way in. This will allow you time to make movements unobserved while the shot is taken. If he is looking at the fuzzy bunny, he's not looking at you. Coyotes are very aware of the habits and actions of other predators and scavengers. A gathering of crows, magpies, or ravens can mean a free meal for an enterprising young coyote. Consider using crow decoys on your next call. Begin the call using a crow call and then go to a rabbit or similar prey call. I have seen coyotes visually home in on the crow decoys and go straight for them because crows will be near the food source. Face crow decoys into the wind for a more natural appearance. Crows like to face into the wind because it helps their sense of smell and, more important, the wind helps them get airborne in a hurry if the coyote decides to eat them instead of the rabbit.

5. TAKE A FRIEND

Besides being more fun to hunt with a friend, it can be more productive, depending on the location. Hunting predators in the East, where there

is a tree behind every tree, is far different from the open spaces of the West. In open country hunting, I have found that three people is the best number for effective hunting. Predators can arrive from any angle and from any direction around the compass. I have hunted some locations where the predators invariably circle downwind before coming in. I have hunted others where they couldn't care less and travel directly to the dinner bell, possibly because of competition for food.

Extra sets of eyes are very helpful in the wide open spaces where a few feet of elevation or separation can provide an entirely different view of the area. I have been on stands with two very experienced hunters who were unable to see a coyote because of the way the Western desert unfolds. I was hunting with one of the most competent predator hunters in Nevada on his home turf and we shot four coyotes that he simply did not see because of minor variations in the landscape.

For a three-person setup, I like to have one person using a heavy shotgun, one with a medium-range varmint rifle with a wide view scope, and the third carrying a long-range, heavy barreled varmint rifle. This allows the trio to make any reasonable shot with a fair degree of success.

6. MOON 'EM

Perhaps it is superstitious on my part, but I'm a big believer in moon phases and how they fit with weather patterns. I can't quote government studies, empirical scientific data, or anecdotal evidence taken from inter-

views with 100 hungry coyotes, but I have observed increased success in hunting dark moon phases accompanied with changing weather, overlaid with the annual cycle of coyote life. This occurs mostly in the spring or fall. During the spring the coyotes are hunting to feed new pups and need a lot of time in the field. During the fall, the pups are substantially grown and coyotes need a lot of time in the field to fatten up for winter. A dark moon phase hampers their night hunting and changes in barometric pressure seem to trigger urgency in feeding. Some hunters do well on the full moon when hunting early in the morning. I have called in and killed coyotes all day long during the dark phase of the moon. Some experimentation with predators in your area will tell you if this moon stuff is valid or if I have just burned out a bearing.

7. NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Coyotes are where you find them. Unlike more secretive predators, coyotes may turn up in the most unlikely areas. One time I called two huge dogs out of the brush while standing in my brother-in-law's suburban backyard, and put to rest, once and for all, the neighborhood controversy on why a succession of "Fluffy the cats" kept vanishing. The coyotes were there because they have everything they need to thrive: food, cover, food, water sources, food, den sites, food, other coyotes, food, good habitat, and lastly, food. Bare, dry exposed desert is a tough place for them to make a living. They do exceptionally well on the fringes of civilization, ranch land, or cultivated areas. Areas

like these may not constitute the whole of their territory, but they prefer to den up in brushy canyons near areas with these characteristics. Look for tracks and scat on roads and cleared open areas. Locate water sources. Then look for cover that is likely to act as shelter. Early in the morning, hunt near fields or meadows if possible. Scouting is key; find where they live and make a house call.

8. SILENCE PLEASE

Sound can make or break a hunt right from the start. I have seen hunters park near a promising setup, quietly ready their gear for the hunt, and then slam shut the pickup door. Why not just set off the car alarm. Press the door shut quietly. All talking should stop once the vehicle doors are opened. The human cough is very distinctive and will travel a depressingly long way. Any human-like noise will give away the farm. Don't lose the opportunity for a successful hunt just getting out of the vehicle.

9. DROP A CALL

I tried several times to use a fawn bleat to bring in coyotes in an area where I knew they were in residence. My efforts were met with a total predatory yawn. I could have wrapped this call in raw meat and not gotten any interest. I switched to the old standby jackwabbit and was nearly trampled by coyotes. In the same area where I could hear only the sound of coyotes snoring in the bushes before, I had packs of predators charging in my direction like I was dipped in au jus and sitting on a bun. What I overlooked in my first attempt was that fawns were not the

primary food group of the predators I was hunting. Identify the preferred food source and then use that call. Mouth calls provide more flexibility in tone when calling. It is surprising how a little tweak on a call method can produce results. Practice and experimentation are the best teachers. For instance, you might try experimenting with a cover call to set the scene.

10. YOU CAN'T HIT THEM IF YOU CAN'T HIT THEM

This sounds so basic as to be silly, but I have seen easy shots badly blown by usually competent shooters. Take the time to sight-in your rifle, which includes checking the stock screws for tightness, and the scope itself for defects. Find out the best load for top accuracy for your rifle and use it. A humane kill at long distance on a small target requires the best possible accuracy you can muster. I have a rifle that is deadly with one particular handload, but it can't hit the broad side of a mountain with factory loads. Just because ol' Hank's pet load will shoot sub-minute of angle groups at half a mile with his rifle, doesn't mean it will do the same in your gun.

Spend some time on the range to find out. Know what the bullet drop of the load is at 300, 400, and 500 yards. Learn to measure distance by using the cross hairs of your scope by comparing the fine wire section to the size of a coyote at known distances. Buy and use a quality rangefinder if the cross hair method does not work for you. When using a rangefinder, range distances in your field of fire

before starting a call. This will provide a real advantage when Field Fido shows up next to a tree that already has been ranged.

Practice with your rifle; know how it shoots and how to handle it safely. Use a quality field rest for a rock steady hold and practice with it. Remember the correct fundamentals while shooting. Take a well-aimed shot while concentrating on being smooth and deliberate. Fast is not fast, smooth is fast. Shooting is a perishable skill and must be practiced. Don't take for granted that, just because you could put the eye out of a canary at 200 yards last year, you can hit the big end of a moose this year.

An easily corrected mistake that costs hunters the coveted double score is failure to reload immediately after taking a shot. After taking a successful shot at a predator, don't wait around to admire your work. Practice taking a shot and reloading as soon as the follow-through is finished. The next coyote could be seconds away. Having to reload, acquire the target, aim, and shoot is too much time, movement, and effort. It increases the chances that something will go wrong. Do yourself a favor and eliminate one of the steps. Remember to count your shots when you shoot. There is nothing as infuriating as the sound of the striker slamming home on an empty chamber.

It takes a lot of time, effort, and money to get into position for a successful shot. Be sure your skills and equipment are ready to close the deal when the time comes.

