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A coyote in the Red Hills of Kansas. GREG KRAMOS/USFWS

WILDLIFE

Coyote Carnage: The Gruesome Truth about Wildlife Killing Contests

Coyote killing competitions, where contestants vie to shoot the most animals, are held throughout the U.S. But some hunting groups are denouncing these events as unethical, and states from New Mexico to New York are considering bans on these and other wildlife killing contests.

BY TED WILLIAMS • MAY 22, 2018

Wildlife killing contests are legal in all U.S. states save California. The most popular targets are coyotes – "varmints," as they're commonly called even by some wildlife officials.

Contestants fan out into the countryside, and, with rifles often equipped with telescopic sights, methodically pick off any coyote that is flushed out by dogs or comes to investigate calls that mimic wounded prey. The most prolific killers win cash or prizes like outdoor paraphernalia and AR-15 rifles. Sometimes there's a children's division.

Body counts are impressive. Example: In last January's Big Sandy American Legions' annual "Coyote Derby" in northern Montana, 146 contestants dispatched 191 animals. Carcasses are piled or hung, photographed and, in virtually all cases, discarded.

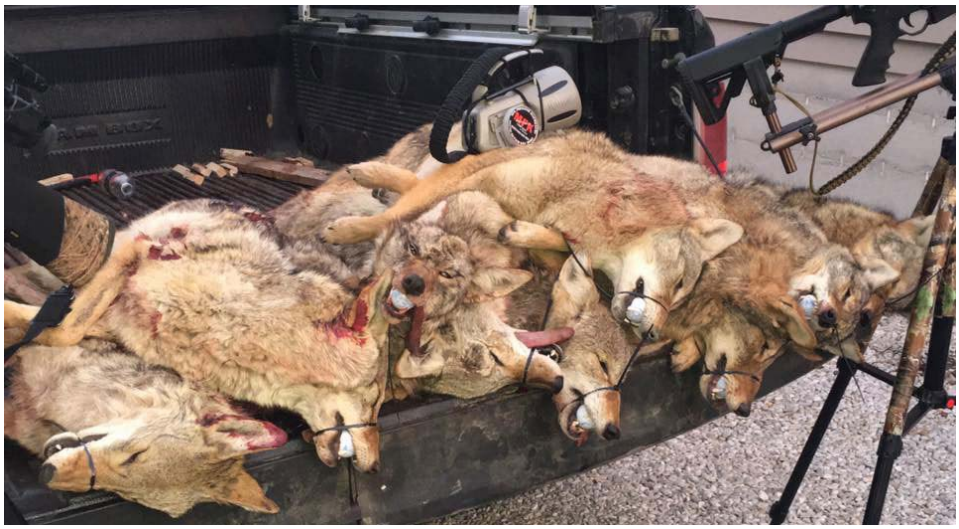
Also targeted in coyote killing contests are other "varmints" that happen to show themselves. These can include bobcats, foxes, raccoons, crows, rodents such as prairie dogs, and even wolves.

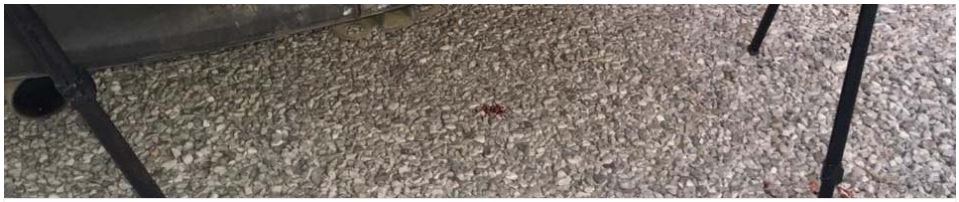
The sponsors of the killing contests wrongly argue that these events help prevent coyotes from taking livestock and deer.

You may legally kill most "varmints" whenever you want and in any quantity you want. And, because few of these animals are officially designated as "game," hunting regulations prohibiting "wanton waste" don't apply – you can just let them rot where they drop. Bounties are even paid on coyotes by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources and certain counties in Virginia and Texas.

Hundreds of varmint killing competitions take place across the country with names like Southern Illinois Predator Challenge, Oklahoma's Cast & Bang State Predator Championship, Park County (Wyoming) Predator Palooza, Iowa Coyote Classic, Idaho Varmint Hunters Blast from the Past, Michigan's Dog Down Coyote Tournament, Minnesota's Save the Birds Coyote Hunting Tournament, and the Great Lakes Region Predator Challenge.

Not all or even most traditional hunters approve. "Awarding prizes for wildlife killing contests is both unethical and inconsistent with our current understanding of natural systems," declares Michael Sutton, former president of the California Fish and Game Commission – a body that promulgates hunting regulations. "Such contests are an anachronism and have no place in modern wildlife management."





Coyotes killed at the Southern Illinois Predator Challenge in 2017. COURTESY OF MARC AYERS/HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

Varmint killers counter that they perform valuable public service, wrongly arguing that these contests help prevent coyotes from taking livestock and deer. “Wanted dead or alive for the crimes of stealing fawns, turkeys, & livestock,” reads one poster. “Shoot a coyote. Save a deer,” is a shibboleth in varmint-hunting circles. And the caption over a posted video on the Facebook page of a group called Coyote Contest boasts, “Well done! Saving livestock one bullet at a time!”

Their message doesn’t seem to be getting through.

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California was the first state to prohibit these killing contests, instituting a ban in 2014. A lawsuit that shut down Oregon’s large JMK Coyote Hunting Contest that same year has been followed recently with: national and state petitions for bans from groups and individuals advocating for native wildlife; cancellation of the Boonie Club Crow Shoot in Williamstown, Vermont, after a social media outcry; the unanimous vote last March by Albuquerque’s City Council for a resolution condemning coyote killing contests and calling for a statewide ban; and impending bills to ban wildlife killing contests in New York, Nevada, New Jersey, and New Mexico. A bill banning coyote killing contests passed the Vermont State Senate on May 9 and is awaiting the governor’s signature.

Coyote Contest is just one of many organizations working to remedy this mindset. “If you’re not aware, predator and varmint hunting is under attack by those that have no idea of the repercussions to farmers, ranchers, and wildlife if we were to stop keeping numbers in check,” it warns.

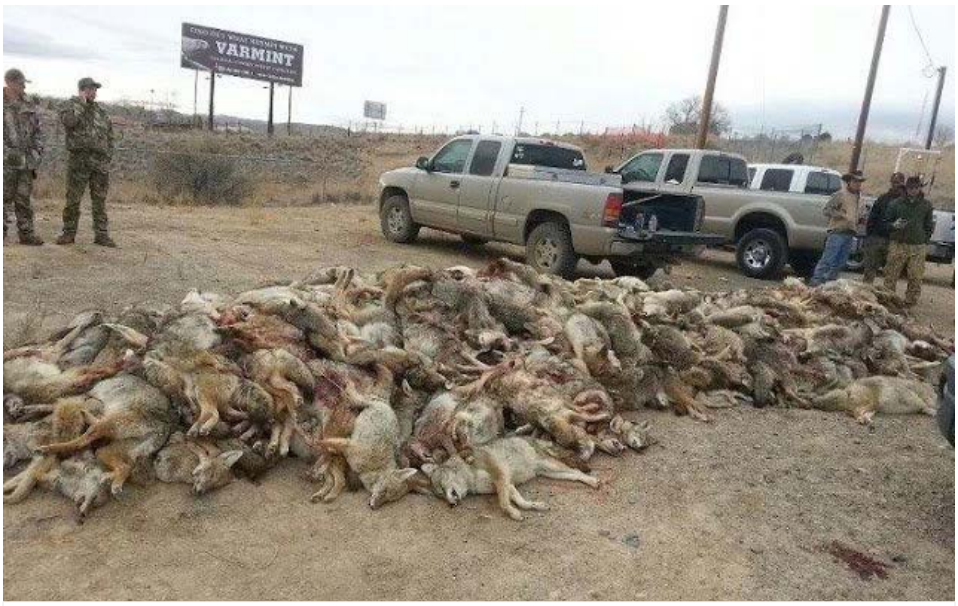
“Anything that doesn’t honor the animals grates on us and seems inherently wrong,” says a former official of a hunters’ organization.

What are these “repercussions?” I put the question to hunter and wildlife biologist Carter Niemeyer who finds the contests “disgusting.” From 1975 to 2000, Niemeyer worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Wildlife Services, which kills predators mostly for the benefit of stockmen. Since his retirement he’s been able to speak freely.

“We did two types of control,” he said, “‘corrective’ when, say, two coyotes were killing sheep and we’d go in and remove them, and ‘preventive’ – gunships in the air every flyable day to shoot any coyote because it might eat a sheep someday.”

The day before our interview Niemeyer had been in Boise, Idaho, giving a talk on predators to Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, a group that promotes fair chase.

“They were the younger generation,” he said. “They looked like Marines. Angry, old white men just weren’t there. They were extremely receptive. One story I told them is the time in Montana we sent in a helicopter and randomly shot a bunch of coyotes. The rancher called me a couple days later and said: ‘Carter, do coyotes revenge kill? We haven’t had trouble with coyotes all winter. We saw your helicopter the other morning and heard lots of shooting. Now we’ve got coyotes killing sheep. What the hell’s going on?’



Coyote carcasses piled at a killing contest in Nevada. COURTESY OF THE NEVADA WILDLIFE ALLIANCE

“When you have coyotes eating rodents and rabbits around sheep, that’s desirable. Random shooting – ‘preventive control’ – creates chaos, removing the good coyotes. So other coyotes immediately come in to fill the void, and some may be undesirables. Same with bears and mountain lions.”

Since Niemeyer left Wildlife Services, the agency has devised innovative non-lethal controls, and it works on eliminating alien invaders that threaten imperiled species, especially on islands. But lethal “preventive control” of native predators still happens. With such models from federal authorities, it’s easy to understand the thinking behind wildlife-killing contests – random shooting as a wildlife control technique.

Robert Crabtree, who did the seminal work on coyote biology in central

Washington and Yellowstone National Park, reports that most "control" takes out the non-offending coyotes, the ones that are not bothering livestock.

Crabtree notes that to really control coyotes it's necessary to remove at least 70 percent of a population, something he says "rarely, if ever" happens. Moreover, virtually all coyote "control" results in more, not fewer, coyotes. Crabtree reports that where coyotes are left alone, the average litter size at birth is five or six, but because of all the competition in summer only 1.5 to 2.5 pups survive. Where coyotes are killed by humans (never resulting in a population reduction approaching 70 percent), less competition results in significantly higher survival.

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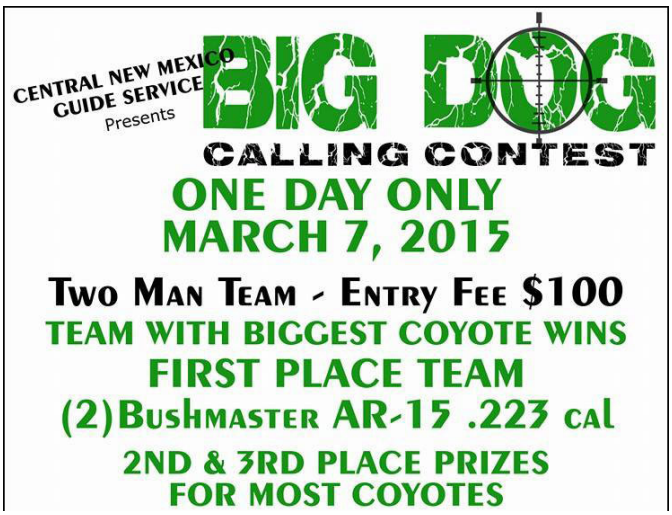
> "Predator hatred is hard-wired even in people who should know that predators make prey strong and fleet."

And Crabtree has determined that because coyote "control" reduces the number of adults able to feed the young, packs tend to abandon their normal diet of rabbits and rodents and turn to larger prey like livestock, antelope, and deer.

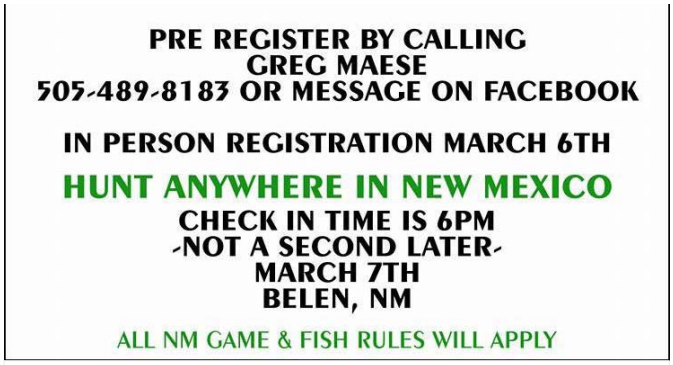
Chapters of the hunting group Pheasants Forever sponsor competitions to kill native coyotes for the alleged benefit of alien pheasants. That reasoning is apparently not shared by the editors of the group's national magazine, which last year published an article entitled "Like Pheasants? Thank a Coyote."

The piece was written by avid pheasant hunter Rich Patterson. Quoting wildlife biologists, he reported that coyotes are opportunists, preferring mice, rats, gophers, mountain beavers, rabbits, squirrels, snakes, lizards, frogs, fish, pet food, garbage, crops, poultry, house cats, and insects to hard-to-catch pheasants and that they run off major pheasant predators such as raccoons, foxes, opossums, minks, and weasels.



"In my youthful hunting years," Patterson wrote, "I would have never passed up a chance to 'help' pheasants by shooting any coyote that came into range. No longer. Instead of sending a pheasant load his way I merely shout, 'Thanks fella!'"

Patterson's view is shared by many in the hunting community. At Orion: The Hunter's Institute, an organization "dedicated to improving the image of



A poster for New Mexico's Big Dog Calling Contest, which has prizes for the biggest and most coyotes killed. COURTESY OF THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

hunting with an emphasis on fair chase ethics," founder Jim Posewitz said, "I don't think any form of hunting should be competitive. I think we need to encourage a more sensitive relationship with the animals we hunt."

Eric Nuse, former executive director of the International Hunter Education Association, offered this: "We don't like anything that smacks of commercialization with money or prizes. Anything that doesn't honor the animals grates on us and seems inherently wrong. These contests create very poor PR for hunters."

It's rare to see agreement between the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the Boone and Crockett Club, which advocates "the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit" of big game. But a HSUS treatise on wildlife killing contests, identifying them as "grisly spectacles that are about as far as one can get from ethical, fair-chase hunting," elicited this response from Mark Streissguth, who chairs Boone and Crockett's committee for Hunting and Conservation Ethics: "They got at least this part right."

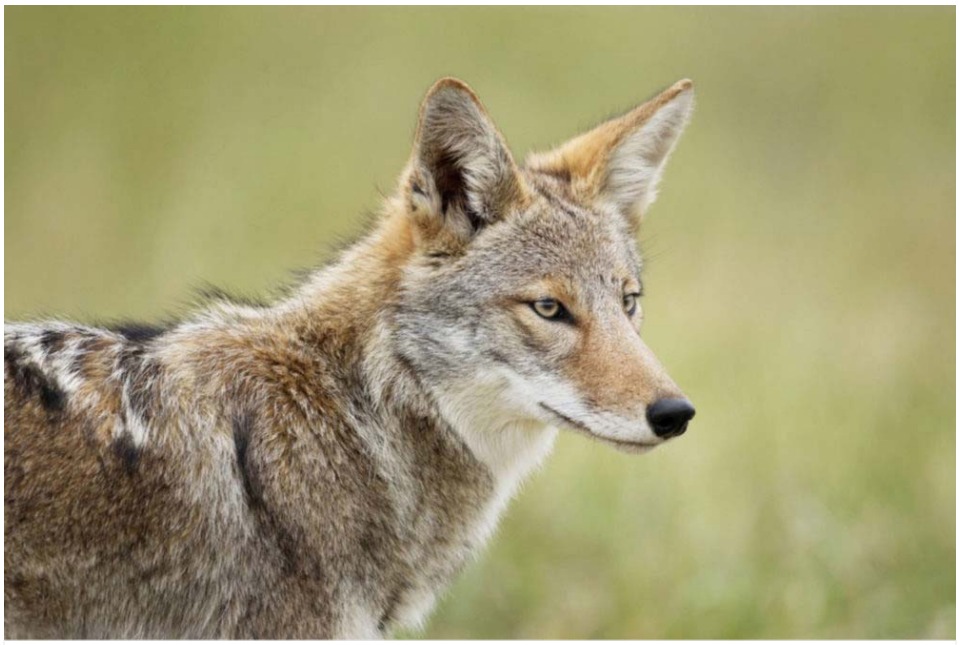
"By remaining silent about killing contests, wildlife agencies endorse the notion that predators are harmful," says one conservationist.

State wildlife agencies acknowledge the biological fact that organized shoots can't control varmints, but otherwise tend to avoid the debate. An exception is Georgia's Department of Natural Resources, which sponsors the "Georgia Coyote Challenge," awarding rifles to winners. The contest is intended to benefit deer. But Georgia deer are so grossly overpopulated that the season limit is 12, and hunters can even use dogs – "retrievers," goes the joke, because Georgia deer are so stunted.

"By remaining silent about killing contests, wildlife agencies essentially endorse the notion that predators are harmful," remarks Walt Medwid, a founder of the Vermont Wildlife Coalition which pushed the state bill to ban coyote killing contests. "Predator hatred is hard-wired even in people who should know that predators make prey strong and fleet. Fighting these contests is fine, but unless we change the infrastructure empowered to make wildlife decisions we're in some ways spinning our wheels."

Melissa Groo, a wildlife photographer who advises the National Audubon Society

on photography ethics, puts it this way: “I’m fine with hunting for food, but these killing contests are wanton waste, not hunting... At a time when so much of our wildlife is in peril, I think we should look at these animals differently and understand that they have families, feelings, and relationships. Let’s honor them by celebrating their lives instead of their deaths.”



An Eastern coyote. SHUTTERSTOCK

The hard-wired hatred of predators that Medwid cited was documented in a 2014 article in *Vice* by writer Christopher Ketcham. He’d gone undercover as a supposed participant in Idaho’s Coyote and Wolf Derby sponsored by Idaho for Wildlife. He even shot when he saw a wolf, purposely missing.

Ketcham and his three co-conspirators showed up for the derby dressed for the part – camo pants and jackets, wool caps, heavy boots and impressive ordnance, including an assault rifle. A contestant named “Cal” bought them drinks.

Cal is quoted as follows: “Gut-shoot every goddamn last one of them wolves.” Ketcham goes on to report that Cal recommended armor-piercing bullets, explaining that gut-shooting with these rounds, rather than aiming for the heart or lungs, has two advantages: First, they’ll pass right through instead of mushrooming; so the animal will suffer, running in panic for a mile or so before it bleeds out. Second, if you’re hunting illegally (as recommended by other contestants), game wardens won’t find a bullet.

The public revulsion generated by such reporting is a major frustration for wildlife killing contest promoters. That’s why reporters and photographers are banned from competitions like the Coyote and Wolf Derby.

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It further laments that contests requesting to be listed on Coyote Contest's website (a tiny fraction of those held nationally) declined from 56 in 2014-15 to 30 in 2015-16 to 17 in 2016-17. It's not clear if this drop indicates a reduction in killing contests or merely the promoters' desire to evade public attention.

Correction, May 25, 2018: *An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Colorado and South Dakota pay bounties on coyotes. Colorado and South Dakota no longer have coyote bounty programs.*

Ted Williams, an avid angler, writes strictly about fish and wildlife conservation. He is a longtime contributor to *Audubon* magazine, writes the monthly "Recovery" column for The Nature Conservancy's *Cool Green Science*, and serves as conservation editor for *Fly Rod & Reel* magazine. MORE →