

The Howling

by Mark Hicks

4 ways to make coyotes charge.

Don't let anybody tell you that coyote hunting is a good way to kill time during the insufferably long winter months. Killing time implies a sedentary diversion like whittling or watching daytime television. Take a lackadaisical approach to coyote hunting and these song dogs will hand your ego to you on a platter, as they did to Mike Rex when he first pitted himself against them in the Appalachian countryside near his home in southeastern Ohio. After two years and countless shrieking sessions with rabbit distress calls, Rex had yet to kill a single coyote.

Seeking a remedy for his poor luck, Rex decided to talk to them in their own tongue. On the day he began sending coyote howls careening through stark winter woodlands, his luck changed. The wild dogs abandoned their caution on the February morning when Rex sat against an aging white oak on a wooded ridge at first light, put a mouth call to his lips and burst the crisp, fragile silence with a long, loud, mournful howl. He was immediately answered by a howl, followed by a demonic cacophony of howls, yips and barks. He had heard this response many times before. It was as though the dominant coyote had to sound off first to give permission to his underlings to chime in.

This time, instead of going to the rabbit squealer, Rex mimicked the coyotes with his call. They quickly closed the distance. Their shrill, intertwining voices sounded like a squadron of ham radios competing to get a clear signal from New Zealand. Four coyotes popped over a rise 70 yards away, back hairs straight up, bushy tails low in the coyote's typical skulking posture, sharp ears and pointed noses working like radar. As usual, the biggest dog was in the lead, a dark gray male that would go 50 pounds. The moment the leader paused, Rex dropped him with a scoped .25/06. The rest of the pack vanished and the air fell silent. He had taken the king of the pack.

Relying on coyote talk alone, Rex now takes a dozen or so of these canines from February through March, a period that comprises the coyote's mating season throughout its range.

Coyotes respond to howls mainly because of territorial instincts. In winter, dominant males are especially protective because they don't want competition for their mates. Rex says that coyotes usually circle downwind in response to distress calls but often drop their guard and come straight in when they think they're responding to a trespassing coyote.

Coyote Calls

The howl is certainly an underused tool in the predator hunter's arsenal, but coyotes emit a wide variety of yips, barks, howls and whines to communicate with each other. Experts offer differing opinions regarding what these sounds mean. Coyote vocalizations may project dominance, an invitation to dinner or just a note to stay in touch with companions.

Rex always starts his calling sequence with a howler, an open-reed mouth call that makes all of the basic coyote sounds. Coyotes may hear the call a mile or more away, but they are not likely to come unless they are within a half-mile. He also maintains that every serious coyote hunter should have an electronic call as well. It doesn't have the range and versatility of a mouth call, but an electronic call does coax coyotes with authentic animal recordings. An electronic call also lets you concentrate on looking for coyotes. Blowing a mouth howler requires serious lung work. Rex has had his best success with Johnny Stewart's CT161 tape, which is a recording of a group of coyotes howling.

Many successful coyote hunters primarily use a distress call, such as a squealing rabbit. Here again, mouth calls reach out to distant coyotes, while electronic distress sounds save your breath and keep the dogs coming.

A subtle rodent squeaker is ideal for coaxing coyotes the final distance into shooting range or for stopping the dogs for an open shot. Squeakers are available in mouth- and hand-operated versions.

Texan Gerald Stewart, son of noted hunter and call-maker Johnny Stewart, takes many coyotes with distress calls alone. Michigan's Roy Aeschbacher, a hunting guide who has been bagging coyotes for 25 years in Michigan and New

York, combines coyote howls and distress calls and throws a rabbit decoy into the mix. He'll change his tune according to the situation, which takes us to what is possibly the most important aspect of coyote hunting: the setup. We've highlighted four common scenarios and tapped the experts for the smartest ways to solve them.

Better Setups

SITUATION 1: You have to hunt coyotes in cover. What's the best tactic?

Calling coyotes in thick cover makes for exciting, in-your-face confrontations. But it is vastly more difficult than hunting where you can see predators from a distance. Even when using an electronic call, the sound must project from close to a hunter in cover, which means you're more likely to be spotted. Your camo and your concealment methods have to be flawless.

Your scent poses a big problem, too. A coyote in cover can more easily circle undetected and wind you at close range. The coyote will leave, and you'll never know it was there.

Employ scent-eliminating products used by deer hunters. These include rubber boots and scent-killing body soaps, shampoos and laundry detergents. Also consider clothing designed to absorb and eliminate human odors.

Set up on the edges of clearings, at the intersections of game trails or near any other openings that extend your range of vision. Try to pick a location where you can also watch your downwind side.

SITUATION 2: Coyotes frequent dense swamps bordered by farmland. How do you pull them into the open?

Working with a partner early or late in the day, Aeschbacher puts a motorized Rigor Rabbit decoy about 40 yards out in the midsection of the field along with an electronic call run by remote control. He then conceals himself at the edge of the field closest to the road. His partner sets up in cover about 20 yards off the downwind end of the field.

Aeschbacher starts by cutting loose on a mouth call with a loud yip-yip-yip hooooow! Over the next 30 minutes, he uses his tape player to scream cottontail squeals interspersed with coyote talk from a mouth call. Through the entire sequence he keeps the Rigor Rabbit rocking back and forth. He gradually turns down the volume on the electronic call in case coyotes are drawing near.

"When coyotes see the decoy hopping around, they come into the field," says Aeschbacher. "If a coyote is still out of range, I switch to a rodent squeaker."

If a coyote circles downwind around the field, Aeschbacher's partner, who is armed with a shotgun, gets the shot.

Stewart uses a similar strategy. Whether he hunts early or late in the day, Stewart stations himself in the middle of a large field, tucked in the shade of a bush with the sun at his back. He will also take advantage of hay bales, farm equipment, barns and other ready hiding places.

Stewart places an electronic call 50 to 100 yards away from his position, between his makeshift blind and the edge of the field where he believes coyotes will show. The recording, invariably some type of Johnny Stewart distress sound, begins with 30 seconds of dead time. This gives Stewart an opportunity to get out of sight after turning on the call.

In areas that receive little hunting pressure, Stewart lets the electronic call do the work. When dealing with hunter-wise coyotes, he complements the tape with coyote talk from a mouth call as a convincer.

"Coyotes will stop at the edge of the field, just inside the cover," says Stewart. "They feel a false sense of security there. If you stay alert, you can spot them."

SITUATION 3: In forested hill country broken up by small farms, coyotes can be high or low. Where should you set up?

Rex sets up near the top of a wooded point or ridge so his calling carries a long way. He does best during the first and last hours of daylight, when coyotes are on the prowl. He prefers open hardwoods where he can see and shoot at least 100 yards to thick areas. He says that he has no luck calling coyotes across fields in Ohio.

Rex begins with a single coyote howl. If he triggers a howl followed by the sounds of excited coyotes, he knows he's in business. Even if he doesn't get an answer, Rex follows the same procedure. He cranks up the electronic call and chimes in regularly with the mouth call for two to three minutes, trying to sound like a pack of coyotes. Then he waits 10 minutes and goes through the whole routine again. If he gets no comers, he crosses over the ridgetop and calls down the other side.

If coyotes answer his howl but they're a half-mile away, Rex quickly cuts the distance in half. He skirts openings and stays in cover to keep from being spotted. After setting up in a location that provides concealment and a good view of the area, Rex parrots whatever calls the coyotes make. If they howl, Rex howls; if they yip and bark, Rex yips and barks back.

"That's where a mouth call is indispensable," says Rex. "You could never do that with recorded sounds." Stewart recommends a trick he calls "stepping on them."

"If a coyote sounds off before you finish your howl, he's ready to kick your butt," says Stewart. "Come right back at him before he finishes his howl. Whatever sound he makes, give it right back to him."

SITUATION 4: You want to hunt at night when coyotes are normally out and about. What's the best approach?

Some Eastern hunters, such as Rex and Aeschbacher, claim they've learned from experience that coyotes will not tolerate lights at night. They believe the Eastern subspecies, which tends to be larger than the Western coyote, is more wary in this regard, and also less vocal.

However, many Western hunters, such as Stewart, believe a coyote is a coyote wherever it lives. Stewart kills far more coyotes at night with a light than during daylight hours.

When night hunting, Stewart and a partner set up in the middle of a field. One hunter calls and operates the light and the other does the shooting. "I use a handheld 200,000 candlepower light," says Stewart. "I leave it on and sweep it in a quick circle, faster than an airport light goes around, as I look for a coyote's eyes in the darkness."

When Stewart spots a coyote's eyes, he sweeps the light past them, tilts the light up, and brings it back so only the soft halo of the beam reaches the coyote. When Stewart sees the eyes again—more dimly this time—he slowly drops the beam down so the shooter can do his part.

When used properly, a light shouldn't scare a coyote away, unless it has seen a lot of hunting pressure, argues Stewart. Besides, seeing the yellow eyes of a predator appear out of the night is a nerve-bending sight every hunter should experience.