

Old Man Coyote and Howler the Wolf

by Thornton W. Burgess

“Of course, you all know to what branch of the Dog family Old Man Coyote belongs,” said Old Mother Nature, and looked expectantly at the circle of little folks gathered around her. No one answered. “Well, well, well!” exclaimed Old Mother Nature, “I am surprised. I am very much surprised. I supposed that all of you knew that Old Man Coyote is a member of the Wolf branch of the family.”

“Do you mean that he is really a true Wolf?” asked Striped Chipmunk timidly.

“Of course,” replied Old Mother Nature. “He is all Wolf and nothing but Wolf. He is the Prairie Wolf, so called because he is a lover of the great open plains and not of the deep forests like his big cousin, Howler the Timber Wolf. Reddy Fox is smart, but sometimes I believe Old Man Coyote is smarter. You have got to get up very early indeed to get ahead of Old Man Coyote.

“Old Man Coyote varies in size from not so very much bigger than Reddy Fox to almost the size of his big cousin, Howler the Timber Wolf. Also he varies in color from a general brownish-gray to a yellowish-brown, being whitish underneath. His face is rather longer than that of Reddy Fox. He has a brushy tail, but it is not as thick as Reddy's.

“In his habits, Old Man Coyote is much like Reddy, but being larger and stronger he is able to kill larger animals, and has won the hate of man by killing young Pigs, Lambs, newly born Calves and poultry. Because of this, he has been and is continually hunted and trapped. But like Reddy Fox the more he is hunted the smarter he becomes, and he is quite capable of taking care of himself. He is one of the swiftest of all runners. Many people think him cowardly because he is always ready to run away at the least hint of danger. He isn't cowardly, however; he is simply smart—too smart to run any unnecessary risk. Old Man Coyote believes absolutely in safety first, a very wise rule for everybody. The result is that he is seldom led into the mistake of simply thinking a thing is all right. He makes sure that it is all right. Because of this he is very hard to trap. No matter how hungry he may be, he will turn his back on a baited trap, even when the trap is so cunningly hidden that he cannot see it.

“Old Man Coyote is a good father and husband and a good provider for his family. He and Mrs. Coyote have a large family every year, sometimes as many as ten babies. Their home is in the ground and is very similar to that of Reddy Fox. They eat almost everything eatable, including such animals and birds as they can catch, Frogs, Toads, Snakes and insects, dead bodies they may find, and even some fruits. Mr. and Mrs. Coyote often hunt together. Sometimes, when the children are full-grown, they all hunt together. When they do this they can pull down Lightfoot the Deer.

“Old Man Coyote has one of the strangest voices to be heard anywhere, and he delights to use it, especially at night. It is like many voices shouting together, and one who hears it for the first time cannot believe that all that sound comes from one throat.

“His big cousin, Howler the Gray Wolf, sometimes called Timber Wolf—is found now only in the forests of the North and the mountains of the Great West. Once he roamed over the greater part of this great country. Howler is as keen-witted as, and perhaps keener-witted than, Reddy Fox or Old Man Coyote, and added to this he has great strength and courage. He is one of the most feared of all the people of the Green Forest. In summer when food is plentiful, Howler and Mrs. Wolf devote

themselves to the bringing up of their family and are careful not to be overbold. But when winter comes, Howler and his friends get together and hunt in packs. With their wonderful noses they can follow Lightfoot the Deer and run him down. They kill Sheep and young Cattle. The harder the winter the bolder they become, and they have been known to attack man himself. In the Far North they grow especially large, and because of the scarcity of food there in winter, they become exceedingly fierce. They can go an astonishingly long time without food and still retain their strength. But hunger makes them merciless. They will not attack each other, but if one in the pack becomes injured, the others will turn upon him, and kill and eat him at once.

“Howler and Mrs. Wolf mate for life, and each is at all times loyal to the other. They are the best of parents, and the little Wolves are carefully trained in all that a Wolf should know. Always the hand of man has been against them, and this fact has developed their wits and cunning to a wonderful degree. Man in his effort to destroy them has used poison, cleverly hiding it in pieces of meat left where Howler and his friends could find them. Howler soon found out that there was something wrong with pieces of meat left about, and now it is seldom that any of his family come to harm in that way. He is equally cunning in discovering traps, even traps buried in one of his trails. Sometimes he will dig them up and spring them without being caught.

“When Wolves hunt in packs they have a leader, usually the strongest or the smartest among them, and this leader they obey. In all the great forests there is no more dreadful sound than the howling of a pack of wolves. There is something in it that strikes terror to the hearts of all who hear it.

“The color of Howler's coat usually is brownish-gray and that is why he is called the Gray Wolf; but sometimes it is almost black, and in the Far North it becomes snowy white. Howler is very closely related to the Dogs which men keep as pets. They are really first cousins. Few Dogs dare meet Howler in battle.”

“My!” exclaimed Peter Rabbit, “I am glad Howler doesn't live around here.”

“You well may be,” said Old Mother Nature. “He would make just about one bite of you, Peter.”

Peter shivered. “Are Old Man Coyote and Howler friends?” asked Peter.

“I wouldn't call them exactly friends,” replied Old Mother Nature. “Old Man Coyote takes pains to keep out of Howler's way, but he is clever enough to know that when Howler has made a good kill there may be some left after Howler has filled his own stomach. So when Howler is hunting in Old Man Coyote's neighbor hood, the latter keeps an eye and ear open to what is going on. In the long-ago days when Thunderfoot the Bison was lord of the prairies, Howler's family lived on the prairies as well as in the forests, but now Howler sticks pretty closely to the forests and mountains, leaving the prairies and brushy plains to Old Man Coyote.”

“All branches of the Dog family do one thing: they walk on their toes. They never put the whole foot down flat as does Buster Bear. And, as you have already discovered, all branches of the Dog family are very smart. They are intelligent. Hello, there is Black Pussy, the cat from Farmer Brown's, coming down the Lone Little Path! I suspect it will be well for some of you smallest ones to get out of sight before she arrives. She doesn't belong over here in the Green Forest, but she has a cousin who does, Yowler the Bob Cat. Shall I tell you about Yowler and his cousins to-morrow?”

“We'd love to have you!” cried Happy Jack, speaking for all. Then, as Black Pussy was drawing

near, they separated and went their several ways.

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. "Old Man Coyote and Howler the Wolf." *The Burgess Animal Book for Children*.
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