

Book Review

Coyote America: A Natural and Supernatural History

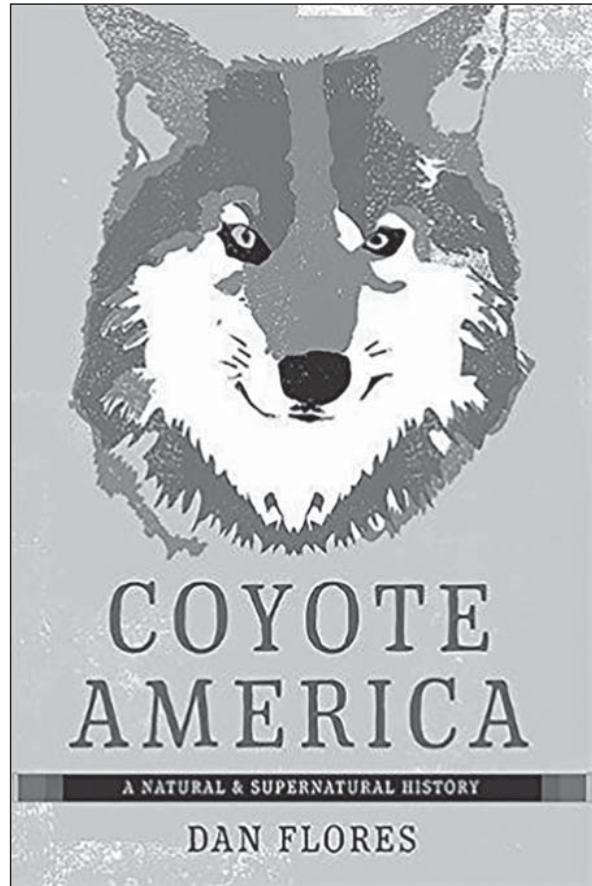
by Dan Flores
2016, Basic Books
New York, New York
288 pages

Review by David D. Vail

STUDIES OF THE AMERICAN WEST have long been interspersed with cultural tales of promise and adventure, spiritual views of landscapes, environmental challenges, and human–wildlife conflicts. Although historians and scientists acknowledge these relationships, they often keep to discipline-specific methodologies and practices. Few have examined how a mixture of natural, supernatural, and secular can reveal new findings in their pursuits.

Historian Dan Flores argues in *Coyote America* that this confluence offers a powerful lens to understand one of the American West's most central, but overlooked animals: the American coyote (*Canis latrans*). Known for his well-researched and engaging prose on the Great Plains and the West, Flores traces the coyote's ecological, cultural, and scientific journey across the continent. *Coyote America* begins by mixing oral histories and folklore with scientific ways of knowing. For Flores, depictions of the coyote as a trickster, deity, and rugged individual powerfully informed more secular, technical approaches.

In subsequent chapters, Flores explores how these various scientific, cultural, and ecological lines blurred throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cultural values that saw coyotes as pests and dangers to livestock helped shape the management views and techniques of control. As farmers and ranchers looked to reclaim lands for industry and profit or conservationists supported coyote removal for wilderness preservation, government funding, scientific methods, and habitat management followed along. The



Bureau of Biological Survey oversaw many of these eradication efforts to reduce animal populations that represented "Nature, red in tooth and claw" (97). This principle, according to Flores, "convicted predators of all manner of crimes and cruelties" (97). While wolf populations declined, coyotes persisted. Flores suggests that "like Old Man Coyote in native traditions, the real coyote simply refused to die. First surprised, then increasingly angry, bureau personnel began to confess privately to one another that for a reason no one could figure out, a bureau with wolf notches on its gun was struggling to win the war of civilization against the slinking, lowlife junior wolf" (103).

However, Flores insists that this "war on wild things" still informs contemporary coyote control efforts in spite of new regulations by the 1970s that encouraged rethinking the ecological value of predator populations

including *Canis latrans*. Readers of *Human–Wildlife Interactions* may bristle at Flores' rigid criticism of predator control laboratories, such as the National Wildlife Research Center's Field Station in Logan, Utah, USA. However, *Coyote America* explores the complicated dynamics between ranchers, scientists, and rural/urban ecosystems, which complements this journal's efforts to study coyote habitat, controls, and interactions. Flores' focus on management tensions and interspecies conflicts underscores studies of *HWI* authors such as Jackson's (2014) look at the "Effects of removal on a lightly exploited coyote population in eastern Nevada" and Orning and Young's (2016) analysis of the "Impacts of coyote removal on space use by greater sage-grouse."

Coyote America makes clear that as wildlife scientists face a host of cultural, political, technological, and environmental challenges related to predator control, their work would benefit from careful study of one of the American West's oldest citizens. As Flores concludes: "We ought to value the coyotes trotting through our yards for the avatar stand-in role they play for us. Humanity faces what from all best indications looks to be a noir future, a daunting challenge, environmentally and ecologically...I for one am going to be watching coyotes very, very closely to see just what they do" (248).

Literature cited

- Jackson, P. J. 2014. Effects of removal on a lightly exploited coyote population in Eastern Nevada. *Human–Wildlife Interactions* 8:180–194.
- Orning, E. K., and J. K. Young. 2016. Impacts of coyote removal on space use by greater sage-grouse. *Human–Wildlife Interactions* 10:144–156.

DAVID D. VAIL is an assistant professor of history at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, with



specialties in environmental history, agricultural history, and the history of science and technology. His book, *Chemical Lands: Pesticides, Aerial Spraying, and Health in North America's Grasslands since 1945*, is forthcoming with the University of Alabama Press as part of the NEXUS Series:

New Histories of Science, Technology, the Environment, Agriculture, and Medicine.

Contribute a Review for *Human–Wildlife Interactions*

Human–Wildlife Interactions publishes book, media, product, tool, and technology reviews.

These reviews should provide a brief synopsis and commentary on a book, media-based communication, product, tool, or technology relevant to human–wildlife interaction or the management of wildlife. This includes computer programs, models, software, or products or tools that can assist managers in conducting their work.

Submissions are sent to an *HWI* Associate Editor for review and for publication recommendation. Reviews submitted by invited or other contributing authors do not incur page charges for publication. Reviews should be approximately 500 words and should include any relevant publication or product information as well as any literature cited.

To propose an item to be reviewed, contact *HWI* at hwi@usu.edu. Submit reviews at digitalcommons.usu.edu/hwi.