

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



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Happy New Year! Our mild December weather has returned to normal just in time for the first moon of the new year. We'll open Conservation Corner 2016 with the Northern Cheyenne legend "Moon of the Popping Trees" as retold by Joseph Bruchac and Jonathan London in *Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back*.

"Outside the lodge, the night air is bitter cold. Now the Frost Giant walks with his club in his hand. When he strikes the trunks of the cottonwood trees, we hear them crack beneath the blow. The people hide inside when they hear that sound.

But Coyote, the wise one, learned the giant's magic song, and when Coyote sang it, the Frost Giant slept.

Now when the cottonwoods crack with frost again our children know, unless they hear Coyote's song, they must stay inside where the fire is bright and buffalo robes keep us warm."

Have you lain awake in your bed at night this winter listening to the cottonwoods popping, frost giants walking, or coyotes howling? We haven't heard many coyotes around our farm lately, but a lone red fox dropped in over the holidays. We were hanging a gate in the steer yard when we noticed a fox in the ditch following the south fence line west towards our place. Later that morning, I watched as he crossed the lawn before turning south and nonchalantly trotting off under the cottonwoods.

Curious, I looked up coyote and red fox numbers on the Iowa DNR website. I discovered that during the winter of 2013-14, hunters and trappers harvested over 15,000 coyotes and 4,000 red foxes across the state. The numbers surprised me, but I confess I haven't followed a trap line since I tagged along with my brother many moons ago when most Iowa wildlife was simply trying to survive.

If you're interested in wildlife, I encourage you to check out the Bowhunter Observation Surveys posted on the IDNR website. Launched a decade ago, the surveys provide data on the deer populations while also establishing long-term databases on several other wildlife species.

Deer bowhunters are good data collectors as they are familiar with wildlife behavior and spend substantial amounts of time in their blinds and stands. For the survey, Iowa is divided into nine regions of about 11 counties each. Approximately 90 hunters from each county are chosen to reach the regional goal of 999 and the state goal of 8,991 participants each year.

After the data is collected and analyzed, the results are published as number of observations per 1,000 hours hunted in each of the nine regions. So what did the hunters find? The most recent data from 2014 reveal the following species observed in northwest Iowa: 1,600 deer, 430 wild turkeys, 0.4 badgers, 1 bobcat, 36 coyotes, 0 gray fox, 14 house cats, 5 opossums, 0.2 river otters, 63 raccoons, 4 striped skunks, and 1 red fox. Who knows, perhaps it's the same one that visited our farm this Christmas season.

