Erich Ziegler, Crystal Falls, harvested this large male coyote in Iron County. (Bill Ziegler photo)

By Bill Ziegler for the Iron County Reporter

IRON COUNTY—Coyote populations have flourished in the western Upper Peninsula in the last three decades. __PUBLIC__This is likely due to ample coyote habitat, a lack of trapping as their fur value decreased and this animal's tremendous adaptability. A few individuals have always hunted coyotes and other predators like bobcats in this area, although the interest in this type of hunting has greatly increased in recent years.

Two experienced coyote hunters in this area are Scott Westphal and Dennis Vissering, both from Iron River. Vissering has been coyote hunting for 30 years and Westphal for five years. They hunt coyotes most of the winter and they also compete in most of the organized predator hunts in the surrounding counties. The pair has had good success hunting what is regarded to be one of the most difficult animals to hunt in northern Michigan. They really work at it and sometimes hunt both day and night during organized hunts.

Westphal said, "I just love being outdoors in the U.P., and this sport gets me outdoors during the long winter."

When asked what he enjoys most about coyote hunting he replied, "The anticipation and excitement when a coyote has been called into close range and is coming at you. He is coming to eat the prey animal we are imitating with something like a distress rabbit call, and when I can hear the coyote creeping forward toward me at night it is quite a thrill."

Coyotes are one of a few animals that can legally be hunted at night. You should consult the Michigan Hunting and Trapping Digest for specific rules. Generally you can hunt coyotes at night with a laser light but you are limited to a rim fire rifle (.22 or .17) or shotgun with shot size smaller than buck shot.

Organized predator hunts are held as fund raisers for local outdoor sports clubs. Some of the predator hunt organizers have suggested that controlling local coyote populations was an additional goal of the hunts.

Craig Albright, a DNR wildlife biologist from Escanaba, has not observed any lasting suppression of coyote numbers from organized hunts. He said, "The DNR does not currently have quantitative coyote density figures, although, they do have trend information generated by their annual Deer Camp Survey. That survey indicates that coyote numbers have increased in the Western U.P. over the last 30 years."

Anyone who has ever shot a deer and not found it that evening, only to find it completely consumed by a pack of coyotes the next day, knows the frustration of having numerous coyotes in your deer hunting area. This scenario happened to my son two years ago during bow deer season. Erich Ziegler said it did make him 'feel better', when he was able to call in and take a large coyote at his deer hunting stand.

Coyote hunters that bait have also been cleaning up a number of road kills on area roads which has been an extremely unpopular job for highway department employees. Anyone interested in possessing a road killed deer must obtain a free, “Highway Killed Deer Permit” by contacting any law enforcement officer in the area who approves that it is, in fact, a road kill. Conservation Officer, Jason Wicklund of Iron River said that he is seeing less vehicle injured eagles, since hunters have been cleaning up the road killed deer that the eagles often feed on at the edge of highways.

With an abundance of wolves in this area, coyote hunters need to make a positive identification on the canine they call in. Coyote hunter Westphal said that he and his partner have not called in a wolf to date, although he does have trail camera photos of a wolf driving coyotes away from a bait he used for coyote hunting. Predator hunters should remember that wolves have much larger heads, noses and legs than coyotes.

As biologist Albright said, the DNR does not currently have coyote population density figures for U.P. coyotes, although they hope to generate them from a large predator study they are participating in with Mississippi State University in Menominee and most recently in Iron County.

Coyotes are known to have a home range of eight to twelve miles and coyote packs do overlap on their territories. Albright added that coyotes are not native to the U.P., but expanded their range here, as habitat and prey conditions improved for them, with the extensive harvest of old growth climax tree species.

DNR Wildlife Biologist, Terry McFadden of Marquette added, “Although coyote abundance is trending up, the bobcat abundance trend is decreasing.”

All the coyote hunters I interviewed said their advice to beginners is to be extremely patient and expect to try many places before they see a coyote. Most coyote callers set up in promising coyote habitat and call from 20 minutes to 45 minutes before they move to the next promising site. Hunters that use bait like deer carcasses report that they see a few more coyotes, although hunting at night will also improve your chances of seeing coyotes.

Another way to improve your chances is to hunt along traditional coyote travel ways like river corridors or combination habitats of abandoned fields with conifer swamps. Hunters that occasionally hunt coyotes typically use either shotguns or deer rifles although the predator hunters who really get into the sport often buy specialized varmit rifles.

Craig Oberg, formerly of DJ’s Sports in Crystal Falls, likes hunting with a .22 mag sometimes fitted with a special laser sight, which are both legal at night. Scott Westphal uses the .22 mag at night, but then uses a long range 22.250 with a scope during daylight hours.

All coyote hunters work very hard for their quarry and feel a great sense of pride when they harvest one. The coyote hunters I talked to say successfully hunting coyotes is harder than hunting deer. The coyote hunting season runs from October 15 to March 1 when nighttime hunting is legal.

The nighttime coyote season continues on private land from March 1 to March 31 if the coyotes are considered to be doing damage. The coyote hunting regulations can be confusing, if you have any questions about coyote hunting regulations you can contact the DNR Crystal Falls office at 875-6622.