

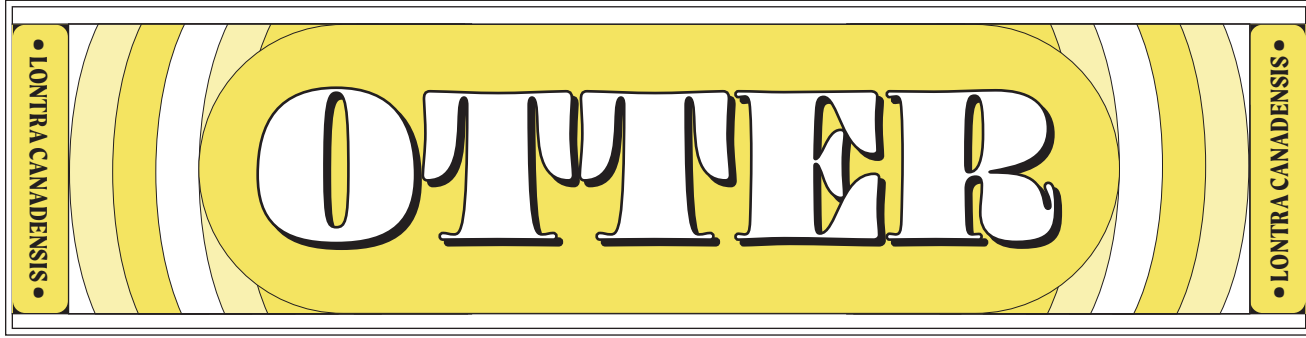


THE GREAT CANADIAN CREATURE FEATURE



Beaver? Pfft. Our contributors weigh in on which critter truly deserves the title of Canada's National Animal

• ILLUSTRATIONS  TIERRA CONNOR •



Otters epitomize everything we could be and should try to attain. In this next life, I could expect no greater move on the karmic scale than to return as an otter

• DREW HAYDEN TAYLOR ↻ MAKES THE CASE FOR THE OTTER •

I HAVE NEVER REALLY UNDERSTOOD THE CHOICE OF the beaver as Canada's national symbol. Yes, they helped build an international fur industry many believe is largely responsible for establishing Canada as a player (by almost being hunted into extinction). Amazingly, they don't seem to hold a grudge about that. But looking at the animal objectively, it's a slow-moving, chubby, flat-tailed creature that eats constantly and builds dams. Additionally, it's viewed as an industrious animal that is always working hard. It has a Protestant

work ethic. Well, maybe the beaver is a better symbol for Canadians than I originally thought.

But if I may offer up an alternative suggestion...the adorable otter.

First of all, there are two kinds of otters in this world (this world being Canada). I'm sure there are other otters somewhere else on this planet. They are such wonderful and amazing creatures, I don't believe the Creator would have limited them to just one continent.

River otters populate much of the fresh waterways of this country; sea otters frolic along the Pacific coast. River otters, of which I am kin to as they are my clan, are the ones I am most familiar with. My partner, who hails from halfway up the B.C. coast, is more acquainted with the other kind. So, I am including both species in my argument.

River otters are one of the few animals, which, once grown, retain an innate sense of fun. My kin are famous for gleefully sliding down snow-covered hills, then racing back up to do it over and over again. They are sleek, fast, endearing—and amazing fishermen. They rule the Canadian rivers and lakes.

My partner's otters, the ones with the big moustaches, are more well-known for cracking clam shells on their chests with rocks, and holding each other's paws while sleeping. They too were once practically hunted to extinction by those pesky two-legged creatures. Equally adorable and amazing, sea otters are also known for taking life pretty easy, by just floating along on the kelp, watching the world go by as they lounge on their backs. All that's missing is a can of beer and some sunglasses.

→ **FACTS & FIGURES** ←

A deep dive

Underwater, an otter can hold its breath for up to eight minutes at a time.

Baby time!

Otter offspring are born in the spring; by July and August, mothers move their babies from beaver pond nurseries into larger lakes—there's better fishing.

Miss Congeniality

Otters are among the friendliest of the mustelids. They'll happily swim close to canoes and other boats.

In the world of boxing, beavers would be the heavyweights. Larger, heftier, a little more clumsy, good at weight-lifting trees. But the otter is leaner, faster, and much more agile. Frequently it can dance around the beaver



River otters in particular are at home both in the water as well as on land, living in burrows or tunnels; both species are social and communicative. Meanwhile, beavers? They say 'no man is an island,' but beavers practically make their own islands.

In the world of boxing, beavers would be the heavyweights. Larger, heftier, a little more clumsy, good at weightlifting trees. And yes, they can hold their own in the water. But the otter is leaner, faster, and much more agile. Frequently it can dance around the beaver.

I think I've made my case. Otters epitomize everything we could be and should try to attain. In this next life, I could expect no greater move on the evolutionary or karmic scale than to return as an otter.

I have spoken.

Drew Hayden Taylor is an award-winning Anishnaabeg playwright and author.

For me, nothing evokes Canada more than an imperious **wolf** calling to its pack with a piercing howl that resonates across the snow-covered wilderness

• ALI AMAD 🐾 MAKES THE CASE FOR THE WOLF •

GROWING UP AS A '90S KID IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, I was often glued to the television screen in my living room. Along with subtitled reruns of *Full House* and *ER*, a smattering of Canadian shows had somehow made it all the way to the Middle East. I didn't know much about Canada, a country nearly 11,000 kilometres away. But television taught me a lot about it, both fact and fiction.

My favourite shows were *North of 60*, a CBC drama about a First Nations town in the Northwest Territories, and *Due South*, a quirky police procedural about an impossibly polite Canadian Mountie, played by Paul Gross. The Mountie's constant companion was Diefenbaker, a majestic, white part-wolf that also happened to read lips—in several languages.

Living as I did in a country where 40-degree summers and sand storms are

the norm, Canada's cold winters, endless snow, and wide expanses of forest became the stuff of fantasy. For me, nothing evoked "Canada" more than an imperious wolf calling to its pack with a piercing howl that resonated across the snowy pines of the wilderness. Ever since those formative years, the wolf has been prominent in my conception of Canada—even after fantasies became different realities when I immigrated to Toronto in 2006.

I arrived in Canada as a shy, inexperienced 17-year-old university student, separated from my family for the first time. Those early days were exciting, but also terrifying—I was in a strange city in an inconceivably large country where no one really knew or cared about me. And I can definitely say that my first-hand experiences of Canada's frigid winter temperatures and deluges of snow were the furthest thing from my romanticized fantasies. Those first few years in Canada were tough. In many ways, I identified with the lone wolf, continents and oceans away from my pack. I had to learn to rely on myself to forge a life and career here. I became stronger and more resilient.

Those traits are what I admire the most about wolves—about all of Canada's wolf species. They're survivors. Wolves lead harsh lives. While some can live up to 13 years in the wild, most die far earlier through disease, starvation, or from human hunting rifles. They're shy like I once was, but behind their skittish elusiveness is a dogged desire to live. This desire is what makes them so terrifying to their prey, but it's also why they're revered by many First Nations as fearless and patient hunters. While I flew on a

plane to leave my family behind, wolves that depart from their pack are known to take solo treks for hundreds of kilometres in search of food and a new home. And in an incredible testament to their endurance and resolve, they can go a week or longer without eating.

But as much as I developed my independence in Canada, I learned that being alone is a limiting way to live. Similarly, while wolves can fend for themselves if they have to, they're also social animals that will work together. The entire pack assumes responsibility for each pup, and a female wolf will adopt the pups of another mother who starves or fails to return from a hunt. I respect how wolves take this balanced approach to life—depending on the situation, they rely on themselves or the collective.

After my initial isolation in Canada, I made university friendships that have grown into lifelong bonds. Those friends are my brothers today. My new pack.

→ FACTS & FIGURES ←

They like to move it, move it

Wolf packs can really crank up the speed, sprinting as swiftly as 70 km/hr to take down big prey.

Cold, uh, comfort?

In winter, wolves will eat the frozen carcasses of moose or deer that have died from hypothermia.

Scent and sensibility

Like dogs, wolves have a sophisticated sense of smell. They can track scents from two kilometres away.

My first years here were tough. I identified with the lone wolf, continents and oceans away from my pack



They were the ones who introduced me to a version of Canada that I'd only experienced on television.

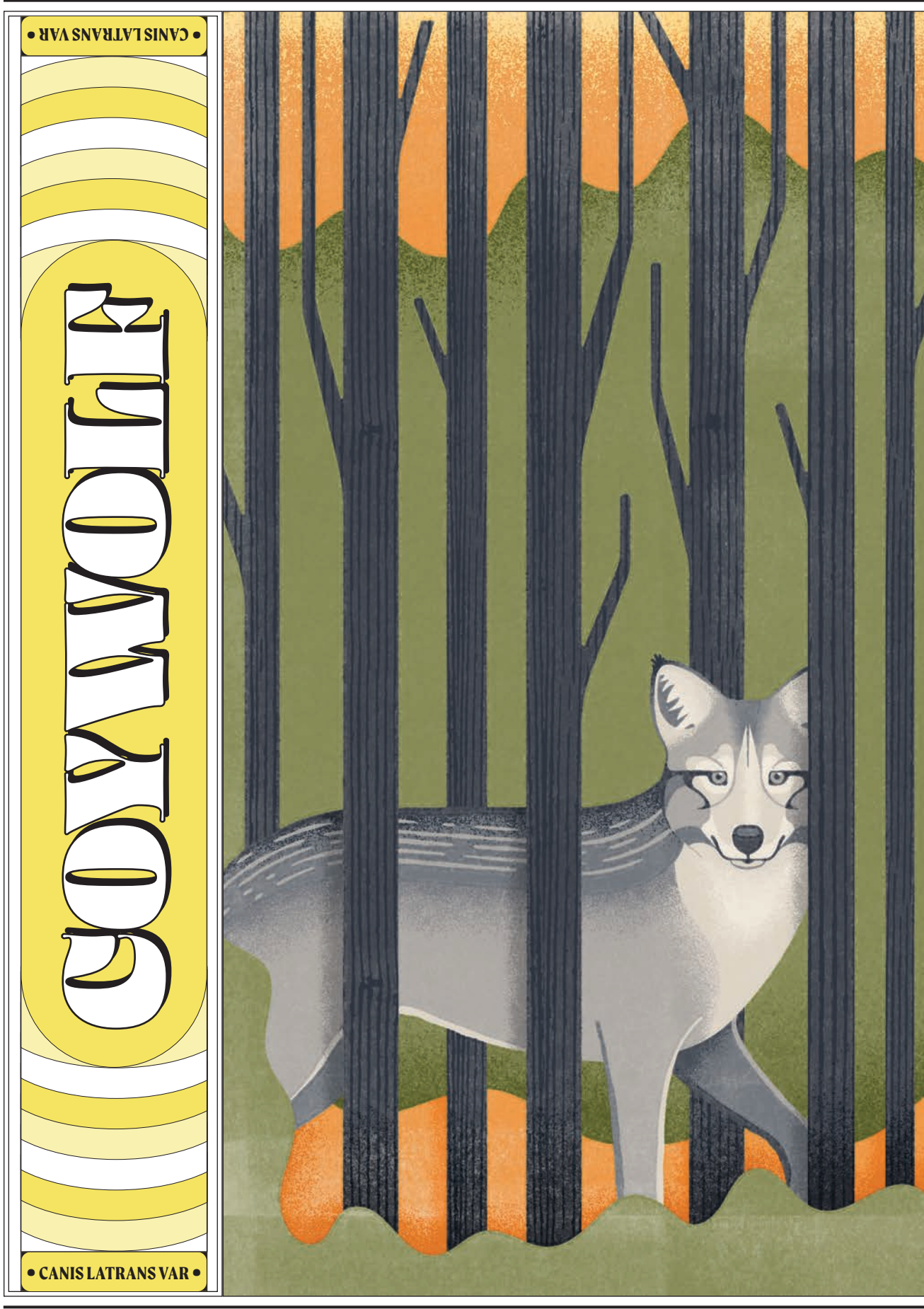
Wolves were once vilified by European settlers and hunted to extinction in certain regions of our country. But the Canadian perception has transformed in the last half-century. The 1963 book *Never Cry Wolf*, author Farley Mowat's

intimate first-hand account of his observations of wolves in the Canadian arctic, is considered a landmark work in shifting public opinion. We now understand that all the wolves that live within our borders are an incredibly integral part of the ecosystem.

This inclusive shift in our country's attitude towards all its wildlife is also

echoed by the experiences of many Canadian newcomers. The fact that I was welcomed in by people from a vastly different background and the fact that we are building new roots together is because of this inclusive spirit.

Ali Amad is a Toronto-based journalist. He writes CL's regular Buy the Way column.



The **coywolf's** traits are clearly Canadian. We all love our big-city amenities, as well as the joys of escaping them. There's no landscape that we can't call home

• PHILIP PREVILLE → MAKES THE CASE FOR THE COYWOLF •



The courtship was quick, and the marriage a mind-blowing success

ANIMALS ARE OBLIVIOUS TO NATIONAL BORDERS. Their habitats pay no heed to lines on a map; birds and herds migrate across them at will. They were roaming the landscape long before those lines were drawn anyway. No nation can ever truly lay claim to any one beast as its national animal.

The coywolf is, quite possibly, the only known exception to this rule. It is the rarest of breeds: a new species of hybrid origin, a mammal forged before our eyes. The coywolf is younger than zoology, younger than even Canada itself, having emerged only in the last 75 to 100 years.

The coywolf's origins trace deep into Canada's cottaging heartland. In the early 20th century, as North America's population grew and its landscape was colonized, the eastern wolf population (*Canis lycaons*) was hit hard. Facing a habitat squeeze and eradication campaigns, the wolves headed north from the eastern seaboard and the St. Lawrence lowlands. By the 1950s their few remaining numbers had found safe haven in and

around Ontario's Algonquin Provincial Park. That's when they met up with some western coyotes (*Canis latrans*) who, facing similar habitat pressures, had migrated from the American midwest and the central plains region of Canada.

So began the greatest-ever dirty weekend in the history of cottage country. For the coyotes, it was probably not love at first sight. The western gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) kills coyotes, so the idea of getting cozy with its eastern cousin probably seemed a bit dodgy. But eastern wolves, being significantly smaller than western ones, were a lot less intimidating. They were also eagerly seeking to diversify the gene pool, so they'd have been in a welcoming frame of mind. Plus both were new to the area, and there's no better icebreaker than "where you from?"

The courtship turned out to be quick, and the marriage mind-blowingly successful. Their offspring are acknowledged by scientists as a species of hybrid origin: zoologists call them "eastern coyotes" and the rest of us call them "coywolves." (For taxonomy nerds, they are known as "*Canis latrans var.*," or "coyote variant.") Coywolf is the better name, given that the species is a perfect fusion of its ancestors' inherent traits, to the point of practically wielding mutant superpowers.

The coywolf's size falls somewhere between wolves and coyotes, weighing in at roughly 45 pounds on average—small enough for stealth and agility, but big enough to throw its weight around. They can be loners or travel in packs. They can hunt together to take down deer, or subsist happily on rabbits, birds, and berries, or shop for groceries, i.e., raid a chicken coop.

But perhaps their most remarkable trait is their habitat adaptability: they can live anywhere. And at a time when the combined pressures of ongoing habitat loss and accelerating climate change are putting more and more species at risk, the coywolf is kicking everybody's ass. Like wolves, they are comfortable in the wild, but like coyotes, they're not perturbed by human settlement. They happily nest and hunt amid rolling hills, farmland, and even in urban areas. Across eastern Canada and the New England states and as far south as Virginia, the "coyotes" people keep seeing in their backyards are most likely Algonquin Park coywolves, busy reconquering the continent.

So in addition to being made in this country, the coywolf's traits are clearly and distinctively Canadian. We all love our big-city amenities, as well as the joys of escaping them. We know how to nest in any habitat; there's no landscape we can't call home. We can get along with just about anyone, and we believe there is strength in diversity. Truly, we are all coywolves.

Regular CL writer and turtle lover Philip Preville is also a friend to all dogs.

→ **FACTS & FIGURES** ←

Let's talk about sex, baby
Unlike some other hybrid species—mules, hinnies, ligres—coywolves are fertile and can reproduce.

And the winner is...
Scientists call coywolves "the most adaptable mammals on the planet."

A wolf in alternate clothing
For a long time, people thought coywolves were just large coyotes.

Ravens can plan, problem-solve, use tools, remember faces, and outsmart children

• **FIONA MCGLYNN** ↻ MAKES THE CASE FOR *THE RAVEN* •

RAVENS HAVE LIVED IN THE NORTH FOR MILLENNIA. That's far longer than our paltry 150-odd years of nationhood. They were there to welcome the first humans across the Bering Land Bridge 15,000 years ago, and we've been interacting with them ever since. Archaeologists have found 10,000-year-old raven skeletons, buried with human artifacts and thought to be the oldest evidence of human ritualistic behaviour in Canada.

"Raven" is an important figure in Indigenous myths and legends, often appearing as a creator or trickster. For instance, Bill Reid's iconic sculpture, *The Raven and the First Men*, depicts a Haida story of human creation where Raven coaxes the first men from a clam shell.

Yet somehow, the clever corvid has had a bit of a PR problem over the last couple of thousand years. In some other parts of the world, ravens are considered dark omens (possibly due to their tendency to hover over cadavers). Unfortunately, it's led to all kinds of problematic labelling. For instance, the group nouns for the species include an "unkindness of ravens" and a "conspiracy of ravens." In an effort to correct this, I propose we refer to them, in the most Canadian of terms, as a "politeness of ravens," going forward.

This ebony avian embodies many Canadian values, chief among them, equity and fairness. In one study, a group of ravens were trained to trade bread for a more delectable morsel of cheese. After several transactions, one of the researchers "cheated" by trading with the raven and then gobbling up the cheese himself. Deeply offended, all but one raven refused to do business with the shady researcher even a month later.

A family-oriented bird, ravens mate for life and raise their young together. They're also good community members, exemplifying the Canadian ideals of empathy and inclusivity. When a raven comes out on the losing side of an altercation, bystander ravens have been observed consoling their pal with beak-to-body touching and preening.

Canada is the most educated country in the world, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, so naturally, our national animal should be equally erudite. Ravens are one of the world's most intelligent

Somehow, this corvid has had a bit of a PR problem over the last couple of thousand years. In some other parts of the world, ravens are considered dark omens



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ID alert

Ravens are larger and twice as heavy as crows. They have a wedge-shaped tail; a crow's tail is more fan-shaped.

Puttin' on the Ritz

Ravens are acrobatic flyers. They swoop, soar, free-fall, and roll through the air.

Yes, they eat that

Ravens will sustain themselves on everything from insects and small rodents to carrion and garbage.

birds along with crows, magpies, parrots, macaws, and cockatoos (you'll notice that the bald eagle is not on this list). Ravens can plan tasks, problem-solve, use tools, remember faces (such as the dodgy researcher), and have been known to outsmart apes and young children.

Ravens also enjoy Canadian pastimes, including socializing. They have a vast range of vocalizations that convey emotions such as happiness, anger, tenderness, and surprise. They give a sharp "trill" when they're looking for a fight and make a "haa" sound when confronted with food challenges, not unlike our own sigh of dismay when reaching a hand into an empty box of Timbits.

Unlike the loon, who takes off to Florida or Mexico as soon as the temperature dips, ravens are resourceful, hardy, and stay put for winter. They like winter sports and can be seen sliding down snow-covered roofs and hillsides. They've been known to make toys out of sticks and pinecones and are probably not too far from figuring out shinny.

I believe that Canadians are finally ready to pin their national identity on the wings of this spirited and ingenious creature. Let's all agree that when Robert Stanley Weir penned the lyrics "With glowing hearts we see thee rise, The True North strong and free," he was talking about our majestic raven.

Fiona McGlynn is an award-winning writer and contributing editor at BoatUS Magazine. She's based in Atlin, B.C.



• CORVUS CORAX •

RAVENVY

• CORVUS CORAX •



• POECILE ATRICAPILLUS •

CHICKADEE

• POECILE ATRICAPILLUS •

CHICKADEES ARE SO ABUNDANT AT BACKYARD FEEDERS and neighbourhood parks across Canada, it's easy to forget that they are wild animals that live in almost every treed habitat in our country. Perhaps you've even seen one and thought, It's *just* a chickadee. It's a common bird, but that familiar sight is also an extraordinary one. Not only are chickadees an animal we can get close to, they are so emblematic of what it takes to thrive here that they deserve a new title: Canada's National Animal.

Let's start up close, because we can bond with chickadees. They make eye contact, and if you can whistle, you can have a conversation with one; they will respond. As children, we learn to sing with them, "Chick-a-dee-dee-dee." And if we're patient, they will come to our hands.

Chickadees are the central characters in my earliest wildlife memories. As a kid, I spent winter afternoons in our local forest holding out handfuls of sunflower seeds and willing them to come. I would stand until my fingers froze and my outstretched arm shook from the effort. Chickadees taught me the patience and stillness I would need when I became a guide and naturalist later in life, and I have never tired of them. As an adult, I return to the same forest, still waiting to feel the pinpricks of their tiny nails against my cold fingers.

By feeding chickadees healthy seeds, we can deepen our connection with them and help them to survive the winter and

Chickadees are tough enough to meet the demands of Canada's huge and wide-ranging habitats

• **JENNIFER KINGSLEY** ↻ MAKES THE CASE FOR THE CHICKADEE •

improve their reproductive success. Yet they don't become dependent on us—they never forget how to forage for themselves. Chickadees don't migrate. They can handle winter—an essential trait for a national animal—and though they only weigh as much as two quarters, they can induce a controlled state of hypothermia to survive the cold nights. By morning, they'll be flitting around again, drinking fresh water from melting icicles.

While these birds are charismatic and approachable, they're also tough enough to meet the demands of Canada's huge and wide-ranging habitats. They have some nifty adaptations to help with this: their legs are so strong that they can feed hanging upside down; they have extraordinary spatial memory for the food that they cache; and they use at least 16 different vocalizations including the intense "high zee" which warns of predators so effectively that other species of birds also listen and react. Like many songbirds, chickadees are short-lived (they rarely see their fourth birthday) and experience about 50 per cent mortality in their first year. One of their main strategies to survive the hardships of their short lives is the very thing that makes them so remarkable: curiosity. You only have to watch a chickadee for half an hour to see this for yourself. They never stop learning, and that—more than any other trait—is what makes them my top choice for Canada. They are always exploring. This makes them more than an animal we can learn about; it makes them a companion we can learn from.

Zoom out from the cute little bird at your feeder and look at a map of Canada. You'll find chickadees everywhere, in



Chickadees taught me the patience and stillness that I needed

every province and territory: in Haida Gwaii, the Arctic coast, the fjords of Labrador, southwestern Nunavut, and downtown Toronto. We have five species: black-capped, mountain, gray-headed, boreal, and chestnut-backed. Between them, they have evolved to live in every major forest type in our country. They are all cavity nesters and partially dependent on tree seeds for winter forage, but they push those habitat requirements to the limit: some live at high elevations, others on the edges of the tundra.

So we might get to know chickadees for how common they are—our companion in nature, our national bird in the hand—but our moments with them might also be the closest encounters we will ever have with a wild animal. When you look one in the eye, you will see tenacity, intelligence, and poise—and an animal that knows our country better than we do. 🐦

Jennifer Kingsley is a journalist and guide who has loved chickadees her entire life.

→ FACTS & FIGURES ←

How do you like my outfit?

As with most birds that brave Canadian winters, chickadees can fluff out their feathers and trap a layer of insulating air around their bodies.

A tall tale

Chickadees have long legs—longer than other perching birds.

Nothing says love like bugs

Courting male chickadees present females with large insects—protein, yum!—in order to woo them.