

Fox Fact Sheet

Of the five species of foxes found in North America, only two are commonly seen: the red fox and the gray fox.

Gray foxes are known to be native to North America, but whether the red fox was ever native is a subject of debate. It seems likely that the red fox was, probably arriving by the same land bridge used by the first humans during the last Ice Age. Many red foxes were brought to North America from Europe in the 1700s for sport hunting, and they remain popular prey for hunters and trappers.

Family Ties

Between the two species of foxes discussed here, almost all of North America is covered. Foxes occasionally make dens under decks, patios or outbuildings. They visit gardens and yards, sometimes to hunt, sometimes they are just passing through.

Foxes are close relatives of coyotes, wolves, and domestic dogs, but they are often called the "catlike canines." Red foxes avoid coyotes, but may coexist in the same area, competing with them for food sources and often using shore and stream habitat between coyote territories. Gray foxes are more likely to share coyote habitat, because the foxes are able to climb trees to avoid potential conflict. Both species are mainly nocturnal, but it's not unusual to see them hunting at dawn or dusk, or even during the day.

Foxes are primarily nocturnal in urban areas, but this seems to be more a method to avoid humans than an actual preference. (It's a popular misconception that a fox out and about during the daytime is disturbed or sick.) They will be active by day as long as they feel secure, and are near enough to safety. This is when they pursue prey, such as squirrels, who are also active by day.

The two species share the ability to thrive in a combination of forests and fields and on a variety of foods, ranging from berries and fruits to small mammals, birds, frogs, and turtles. Their adaptability makes them well-suited to survival in urban and suburban settings (where they can be a help to homeowners in keeping keep down populations of "pests" such as rodents).

Gray foxes are the shier of the two species. Red foxes are sometimes downright outgoing, showing brazenness that is so overt as to be disarming. A hiker along a woodland trail may encounter a fox who does not retreat, but sits and watches the human approach. Likewise, a homeowner hanging laundry may watch a fox walk through the yard, going about its business, seemingly oblivious to the human nearby. Why this occurs is anyone's guess.

Foxes appear to be larger than they are because of their relatively long legs and elongated bushy tails. The red fox is the bigger species, weighing seven to 15 pounds and reaching

about 3 feet in length with an extra foot- or foot-and-a-half-long tail. Gray foxes rarely exceed 11 or 12 pounds, and often are much smaller.

Both red and gray foxes can run at speeds up to 26 miles per hour, and tend to elude competitors by circling and backtracking, rather than fighting.

A Red Fox by Any Other Name...

Because there is a great variety of color types among foxes, it is not always a sure bet that a red-colored fox is a "red fox" or a gray-colored fox a "gray fox." Red foxes are distinguishable from gray foxes by the tips of their tails, which are white.

Both red and gray foxes mate seasonally, beginning in mid-January, and usually give birth to kits in March or April. Depending on population density and food supply, litter sizes vary between three and eight. The kits are weaned by nine weeks, and begin to hunt with their parents. They may remain nearby the parents until late summer or early fall before dispersing to establish their own territories.

Foxes may dig their own dens, or they may occupy the abandoned dens of woodchucks, badgers or other burrowing animals. They generally use their dens when raising kits or to escape severe winter weather. But even when temperatures fall to levels that are quite uncomfortable to humans, foxes prefer to rest under brush piles or fallen logs.

Do Foxes Eat Cats?

People are frequently concerned about their pets being outdoors when foxes are around. We do not recommend that cats be allowed to roam freely, and suggest that the best way to avoid encounters between foxes and cats is to keep the cat indoors. By and large, however, foxes seem to pay little heed to adult cats, recognizing that they are dealing with an animal that is almost their size (often) and certainly one that has a well-deserved reputation for self-defense. Kittens, however, could be easy prey for a fox, as might small adult cats; therefore, caution is suggested whenever the two might come into contact.

Problems and Solutions

People are sometimes surprised to learn that foxes live in their neighborhoods, but there's almost never any cause for concern. Foxes are not dangerous to humans, except when rabid, and fox rabies are rare in most places.

Outdoor pets such as rabbits and poultry should be protected from foxes, however, by the use of secure, sturdy hutches and pens. Because foxes will dig under fences, it's important to bury an 8-inch, L-shaped footer at least a foot deep along the outer perimeter.

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Keeping these cautions in mind, most encounters with foxes are an exciting reminder of the beauty and diversity of our wild neighbors. Your best chances of viewing one are in the early morning and late evening hours, along the edges of forests and fields.

Habitat Management

Food lures foxes into suburban yards. Compost piles should never receive meat scraps and garbage should be placed outside only the morning of collection. If that is not possible the cans must be secured from access. This can be done by simply providing tight-fitting lids if only foxes are involved or more secure fasteners if other, more persistent trash specialists such as raccoon are involved. A cord threaded through the handle of the lid and hooked onto the sides of the can is a simple yet effective tactic. Dishes of pet food should not be left outside overnight. Foxes will be attracted to bird feeders and may even eat spilled sunflower seeds if hungry enough. Mostly, however, the sight of a fox around a feeder suggest that the spillage is being used by rodents, who have left their scent there and attracted the fox to the site.