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FOXES



WHAT SPECIES OF urban wildlife has been studied more than any other? If you guessed the red fox, you are right (Figure 50). Thanks to work in Europe and Great Britain, there is a body of research publications, ranging from population and behavioral studies to reviews of injury and disease, devoted exclusively to urban foxes. The research expands on what anyone who has observed or read about foxes already knows: these are fascinating animals who combine many of the behavioral and ecological traits of cats with their obvious membership in the dog family—enough so that the red fox is often called the “cat-like canine.”

To many people, the fox is the animal they least expect to see in the city. In fact, foxes are well adapted to urban life, being (like most other successful urban mammals) generalists who use a wide range of habitats, exploit a wide range of natural and human-produced foods, and alter their activity schedules, if necessary, to be primarily active when humans are not. The reward for this is a longer life than their rural counterparts and a death that is more likely to come from disease or accident than by predation, hunting, or trapping.

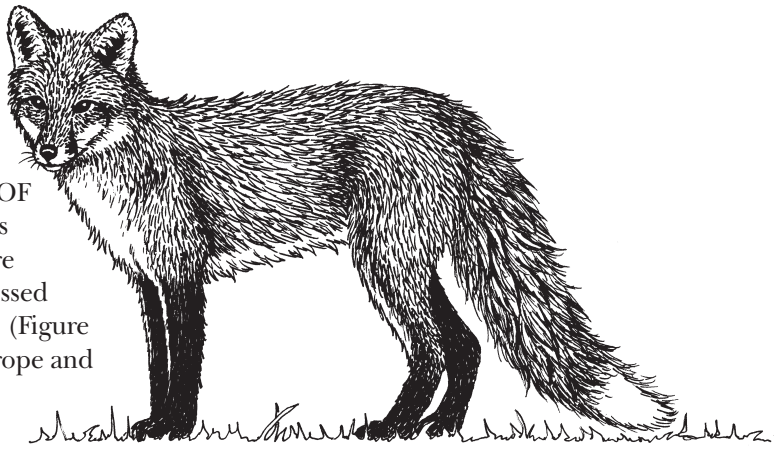


Figure 50 *Red fox*

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- ◆ **The red fox is the most widely distributed wild canid in the world.**
 - ◆ **Foxes occasionally make dens under decks, patios, or outbuildings.**
 - ◆ **They visit gardens and yards, sometimes to hunt, sometimes to get from one place to another, sometimes just because they are there.**
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Classification and Range

There are three genera and six species of foxes in North America, but only three—the red (*Vulpes vulpes*), gray (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), and kit (*Vulpes macrotis*) fox—are town or city dwellers. The last is of quite some interest: it is an endangered subspecies in California found in towns (Bakersfield, for example) and a rare case in which urbanization may be helping an endangered species survive. (Coyotes are the primary cause of mortality in this smaller canid, and the urban setting may inhibit these predators' presence.)

While red foxes are native to North America, at least some of the populations in the United States are descended from animals imported by European colonists, seeking to transfer the pastime of fox hunting with hounds from the Old World to the New. Other red foxes may have come to North America by the same Ice Age land bridge that the first humans used, complicating the picture of which populations are truly “native.” The species origins wouldn't matter to anyone but specialists if the distinction between foxes as native or alien were not used as an excuse to persecute them in some places.



Figure 51 *Gray fox*

Foxes are not large animals, although their relatively long legs and bodies elongated by bushy tails make them appear to be. The red fox is the bigger species, weighing seven to fifteen pounds, with a body of about two feet in length attached to a twelve- to eighteen-inch tail. Grays tend to be smaller than reds, but there is considerable overlap in size between them (Figure 51). Kit foxes are markedly smaller than either gray or red foxes. Because color varies greatly among foxes, a red-colored fox is not necessarily a “red fox” or a gray-colored fox a “gray.” When you can get close enough to see it, a white tip at the end of the tail indicates a red fox.

Habits

Both red and gray foxes prefer diverse habitats that have fields, woods, shrubby cover, farmland, or other variety. Gray foxes are more dependent, apparently, on woodlands than are red, and they sometimes even climb trees when the mood strikes or need demands. Both species readily use urban and suburban parklands, golf courses, and developed areas when they can find enough privacy.

Foxes are primarily nocturnal in urban areas, but this seems an accommodation to avoiding humans rather than a preference. If you do see a fox out and about by day, it doesn't necessarily mean the fox is ill. Foxes are active by day as long as they feel secure, and if they are pursuing prey that is active by day, such as squirrels.

Foxes, like many other wildlife species that successfully exploit urban environments, are dietary generalists who can survive on a wide variety of plant and animal matter. Although far more frequent and capable hunters than are many other urban wildlife species, such as raccoons, when certain fruits are abundant, foxes will not hesitate to go vegetarian. One reason they are described as cat-like is that foxes hunt more by stealth than by the pursuit tactics typical of canids. A hunting red fox is all ears, literally, as he seeks the faint rustling sounds made by his prey, stalking closely and launching a long, graceful,

leaping pounce at the moment he feels he has locked onto his target.

Kits, as the young are called, are born in the spring, usually in March or April. Litters may be as large as eight, but average four or five kits (Figure 52). Once they are about six weeks of age, fox kits can survive the loss of their mother, since their father and even other group members (last year's kits grown up, but still with the family) will keep feeding them. (Alloparenting is the term for the care given by such nonbreeding male or female foxes.) The kits are weaned by nine weeks and begin to hunt with their parents. They may stay on after that or, under some circumstance, leave (or disperse, as it termed) in late summer or early fall to establish their own territories.

Both red and gray foxes may dig their own dens, or they may occupy the abandoned dens of woodchuck, badger, or other burrowing animals. Dens are used mostly as an escape from severe winter weather or for raising kits. Even when winter weather is uncomfortable to humans, foxes often rest under brush piles or fallen logs and may be covered by snow as they wrap their bushy tails around their bodies.

Public Health Concerns

Foxes are the primary carrier of one of the major strains of rabies that infects foxes as well as other animal species. In some parts of the country, foxes carry the echinococcosis tapeworm, which can cause a serious and sometimes fatal disease in humans. Sarcopic mange is a very serious problem in some fox populations, but it is not a health concern for humans.

Problems

People may be surprised and sometimes frightened to discover that foxes live in their neighborhoods, but these fears are almost completely groundless. Foxes are not dangerous to humans, except when they are rabid (which is very rare) or are captured and han-

dled. Even then, it takes a lot of handling for a fox even to defend himself by biting, and the natural tendency is for the animal to flee rather than fight. Red foxes occasionally prey on small house cats or kittens and certainly will take small animals such as rabbits, guinea pigs, and poultry when they are left outside unprotected. Both red and gray foxes will eat cultivated grapes, raspberries, and other fruit, but they usually do not bother garden vegetables. In all, foxes do such little damage and cause so few conflicts with people that we hesitate to characterize them as a problem at all. Nonetheless, thousands are killed every year because they are perceived as threats.



Figure 52 *For many people seeing a wild animal like a fox is a real thrill. With a little patience and care, you can experience that and more in the spring when kits are old enough to come out of the den and begin to explore the world around them.*

Solutions

Tolerance

Sometimes foxes are blamed for damage they did not cause. The trash can that was knocked over by the neighborhood dogs may attract a fox who is observed and then blamed. Foxes may cut through yards when moving from one hunting area to another, and the homeowner becomes unreasonably concerned about their presence. In fact, the fox is not a bother at all. If left alone, he will probably do the homeowner a service by performing a little free rodent control as he passes by.

Exclusion

Poultry should be protected with secure hutches or pens built to withstand any effort by foxes, raccoons, or dogs to break in. Because predators can dig under fences, it is important to make sure that an L-shaped footer is buried around the outer perimeter. Electric fences can also exclude foxes but work best in conjunction with other permanent perimeter fencing, as when a single-strand electrified fence is placed about four inches off the ground in front of a chain link or other fence. For their health and safety, The HSUS recommends that pets such as rabbits and guinea pigs not be kept outdoors, especially at night. If outside by day, they should be housed in structures that are secure from both bird and mammal predators.

Repellents

No repellents are registered expressly for use on foxes, although the many products sold to repel domestic dogs from yards and gardens undoubtedly will have a similar effect on a passing fox.

Scare Devices

Because foxes are active mostly by night and are very cautious about people when out and about, suburbanites rarely see them. Noise-making devices, ranging from transistor radios to motion-sensitive alarms, can be quite effective in combining repelling and harassing strategies. A motion-activated sprinkler can be an effective deterrent in lawns or gardens. Even using a loud voice or banging on a pot or pan can frighten these very sensitive animals and keep them out of an area where

The Bold Fox

Sometimes red foxes will exhibit a brazenness that is so overt it is disconcerting. A hiker along a woodland trail may encounter a fox who does not retreat but rather sits and watches the human approach. Likewise, a homeowner hanging laundry may watch a fox walk through the yard, going about her business, seemingly oblivious to the human nearby. Why this occurs is any human's guess, and the foxes aren't telling.

they are not wanted. They retreat at any sound or sight that is the least bit threatening.

Harassment

Fox dens under porches and decks are one of the most commonly reported issues with these animals. As with all instances of any wild animal denning or nesting in an inconvenient spot, we recommend tolerating the family until the young are old enough to follow the parents on nightly forays and the family moves on. When they are gone, exclude them from reusing the den. Fox kits will spend time playing outside the den just before they are able to go out with their parents, making this one of the most enjoyable wildlife viewing experiences people can have.

Still, some people will want the family to move sooner rather than later. In these cases, mild harassment may encourage a move.

Do Foxes Eat Cats?

People are frequently concerned about their pets being outdoors when foxes are around. The best way to avoid encounters between foxes and cats is to keep the cats indoors. By and large, however, foxes seem to pay little heed to adult cats, recognizing that they are dealing with an animal often almost their same size, with a well-deserved reputation for self-defense. Kittens, however, could be easy prey for a fox, as might small adult cats.

Start by placing objects, leaves, soil, or mulch in the den openings to disturb the residents. Used kitty litter or almost anything with a strong human scent will also alarm the foxes. Try a pair of smelly sweat socks or old sneakers placed in or near the den opening. People claim success in getting fox families to move simply by mounting Mylar® balloons two to three feet off the ground, just outside the entrance to the den. In all of these strategies, the idea is to make the parents uncomfortable and get them to move the litter to a more secure location. After that has taken place, make sure all the kits are out of the den before permanently excluding them.

Habitat Management

Food lures foxes into suburban yards. Attractants such as meat scraps should never be composted, and trash should be stored securely or placed outside only on the morning of collection. Don't leave pet food outside and never deliberately feed wild animals such as foxes, advice with which our friends across the Atlantic would disagree. In Britain, foxes are not only welcomed when establishing dens under sheds in backyards but are also fed regularly and systematically to make sure they feel accepted and appreciated. Here we discourage this practice, no matter how benign it may seem, because the fox that is used to getting handouts in one yard may be perceived as a threat in another, and treated accordingly, sometimes with lethal results.

A Last Word

For all the many studies that have been conducted on urban foxes, many more have been conducted in rural areas, and are few compared to the number devoted to animals such as deer, bears, and even quail. Game species (those that are hunted and trapped) have always received more emphasis in our society than have nongame animals. A slow change is occurring, as people have become increasingly aware of the importance of all species of

wildlife and of the need, as conservationists have said repeatedly, to preserve the whole and not just the parts.

Resources

Where they have been best studied, in the United Kingdom, Stephen Harris's *Urban Foxes* (Whittet Books, 1994) summarizes many years of fascinating natural history. A more personalized account is David MacDonald's *Running with the Fox* (Facts on File, 1987), which describes a graduate career focused on these animals.

The Fox Project in the United Kingdom has information on deterrence and other natural history facts about foxes:

www.thefoxproject.org.uk



