

The Humane Society of the United States
Foxes: The Red and the Gray



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

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.

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.

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 conflicts between foxes and cats is to keep cats indoors. By and large, foxes seem to pay little heed to adult cats, recognizing that they are dealing with an animal almost their own size. Kittens and small cats, however, could be easy prey for a fox; therefore, contact between the two should be avoided.

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.