

FOXes

Living in Harmony with Your Wild Neighbors

IT MAY come as a surprise that foxes—portrayed as the embodiment of elusiveness and cunning in folklore and fable—are common residents of many cities and towns. In fact, thanks to research done in Europe and Australia, the red fox is undoubtedly the most thoroughly studied urban wildlife species.

Foxes are most closely related to coyotes, wolves, and domestic dogs. But the many catlike behavioral traits they exhibit set them apart from other canids. Of the six species of foxes found in North America, only two commonly live in close proximity to humans: the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) and the gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*). These two species have just what it takes to survive in the city—a high degree of adaptability when it comes to food, habitat, and activities.

Gray foxes are native North Americans. They are shy and primarily nocturnal, feeding on small mammals and birds, eggs, insects, fruits, and carrion. Grays are the only American canid with true tree-climbing ability, using this skill to forage and escape predators. They are also good swimmers.

Red foxes are native to North America as well, but many were also imported here from Europe, primarily to perpetuate hunting traditions. There is considerable debate in places over which red fox is “native” and which is “nonnative,” with the unfortunate result that many deemed to be the latter are persecuted and destroyed for fear that they are threatening populations of sensitive species.

The vast majority of conflicts between foxes and humans can easily be avoided, and humane methods of conflict prevention and resolution are available for the occasions when real problems do occur. Often people seem to think that just seeing a fox in their neighborhood is indicative of a problem, when in fact that may not be the case.

People can live in harmony with wildlife—you just need to know your wild neighbors!



Vital Statistics

Description: Highly variable; red foxes may look gray, gray foxes may be reddish—only the red fox has a white tail tip, however.

Habitat: Varied, including mixed cultivated and wooded, urban, and suburban areas.

Diet: Omnivorous.

Adult Length (nose to tail tip):

Gray Fox: 31–44 in. (80–113 cm)

Red Fox: 35–48 in. (90–123 cm)

Adult Weight:

Gray Fox: 7–15 lbs. (3–7 kg)

Red Fox: 7–17 lbs. (3–8 kg)

Activity: Generally, but not strictly, nocturnal.

Birthing Season: March to May.

Age When Independent: 6 months.

Control and Damage Prevention

FOxes pose very little threat to humans, their property, or their companion animals, and conflict situations are rare. Still, people may be surprised and frightened to discover that foxes are living nearby. Foxes may be blamed for problems they do not cause, such as overturned trash cans or garden and landscaping damage. In fact, foxes provide a valuable service—controlling rodent populations in exchange for being allowed to live in peace.

Most conflicts between humans and foxes are easily avoided by following a few simple suggestions, most of which will help to prevent conflicts with other wild species, as well.

- Domesticated animals such as rabbits and poultry should be housed in secure hutches or pens. Foxes can dig, so burying the fence in an L-shaped footer will provide added security. This is hardware cloth or welded wire buried a foot deep in an "L" shape, at least eight inches out, to keep animals from burrowing under it. A single strand of electric fencing, used with proper precautions and attention to local ordinances, can be effective in excluding many wild species that are attracted to small animals.

- Foxes are wary by nature and can be startled by sudden noises. Odors generally are more effective as long-term repellents, but may not be registered for use in the United States. Details about deterrents can be found at The Fox Project's website, www.thefoxproject.fsnet.co.uk. The Humane Society of the United States also has a list of manufacturers and vendors of products for resolving conflicts with wildlife at www.wildneighbors.org.

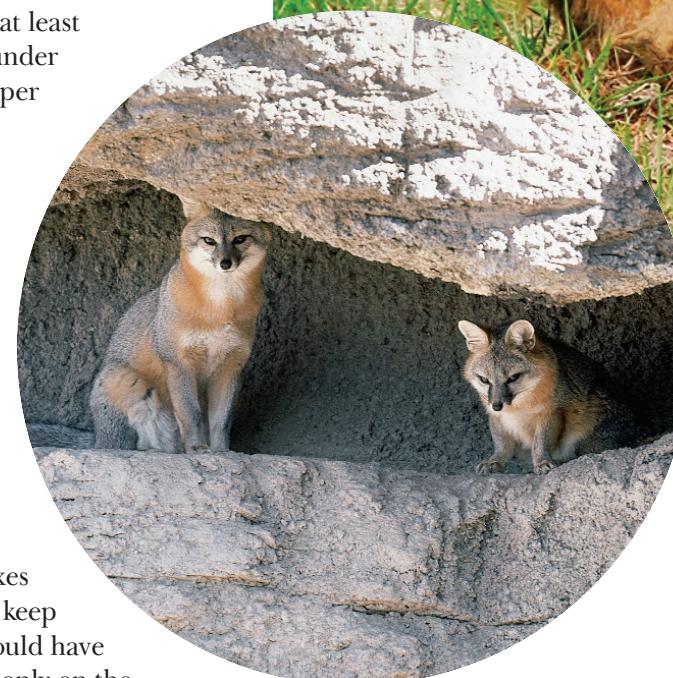
- Food is an irresistible lure for all wildlife species, foxes included. Bring pet food bowls inside after use and keep meat scraps out of compost piles. Garbage cans should have screw-on lids and, ideally, should be placed outside only on the morning of collection. Foxes will also eat spilled seed under bird feeders—something people may not even think about when considering sources of attraction.



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JOHN HARRISON



Injured or Orphaned Animals

WILDLIFE rehabilitation centers provide care for injured and orphaned wildlife until the animals can be released back into the wild. In most states wildlife rehabilitation

can be practiced only with a state and/or federal permit.

Never try to capture or handle an injured, ill, or orphaned fox on your own and never assume a pup is an "orphan" without checking with local authorities. Female foxes leave their pups alone for long periods of time and are not always seen when they do return to feed their young. Assume pups are being tended to unless you have compelling reasons to believe otherwise.

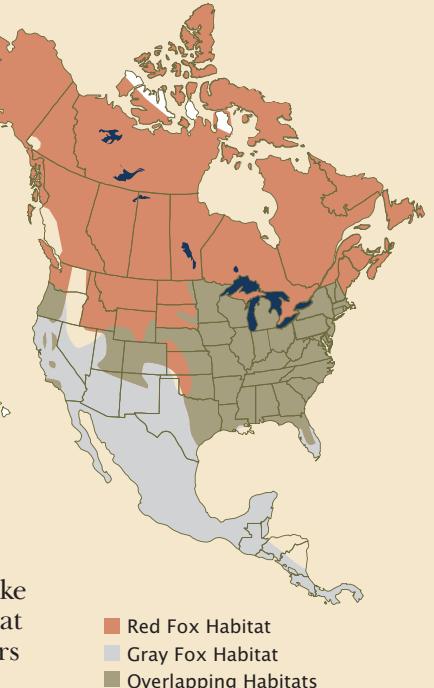
The care of injured or truly orphaned foxes is best left to a trained rehabilitator. Fox pups, like all infants, have unique nutritional requirements. Milk replacers available at pet stores may claim to be appropriate for all small mammals, but this is simply not true. Problems that result from an inappropriate diet, such as metabolic bone disease (also known as rickets), can debilitate an animal for life. In addition, behavioral and developmental needs must be met for a young fox to survive in the wild upon release. Zoos and wildlife centers are rarely an option for unwanted, hand-raised foxes.

If you've found a fox in need of assistance, ask your local humane society to recommend a wildlife rehabilitator in your area.

Information on humane prevention of conflicts with foxes was prepared by Kieran Lindsey, Natural Assets Consulting, Cedar Crest, New Mexico, and reviewed by Stephen Harris, Ph.D., of the University of Bristol, England.

Fox Facts— GEE WHIZ

- Foxes can shift to a meatless diet that includes insects, berries, and plants when necessary.
- Unlike many other mammals, red foxes are highly sensitive to low-frequency sounds.
- Neither red nor gray foxes usually weigh more than a big house cat.
- A red fox den is called the fox's "earth."
- Both red and gray foxes make a variety of sounds, some that are typically canid and others that seem out of this world.



Consequences of Feeding

WE STRONGLY caution against feeding wildlife if the practice can lead directly or indirectly to the harming of any wild animals. In the case of foxes this includes virtually anywhere they occur in North America.

A fox who is acclimated to people will be at risk from many human activities and may be perceived as threatening and subjected to lethal control. In Britain and elsewhere, foxes are fed regularly and systematically and are welcomed and accepted into the fabric of people's lives—with no apparent harm to either. In American culture, however, circumstances are different and we urge people not to intentionally feed foxes.



REGIONAL OFFICES:

CENTRAL STATES

Serves: IL, KY, NC, TN, WI
800 West Fifth Ave., Suite 110
Naperville, IL 60563
630-357-7015, Fax: 630-357-5725

GREAT LAKES

Serves: IN, MI, OH, WV
745 Haskins Rd., Suite G
Bowling Green, OH 43402-1696
419-352-5141, Fax: 419-354-5351

MID-ATLANTIC

Serves: DE, NJ, NY, PA
Bartley Square
270 Route 206
Flanders, NJ 07836-9082
973-927-5611, Fax: 973-927-5617

MIDWEST

Serves: IA, KS, MN, MO, NE
1515 Linden St., Suite 220
Des Moines, IA 50309
515-283-1393, Fax: 515-283-1407

NEW ENGLAND

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P.O. Box 619
Jacksonville, VT 05342-0619
802-368-2790, Fax: 802-368-2756

NORTHERN ROCKIES

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490 North 31st St., Suite 215
Billings, MT 59101
406-255-7161, Fax: 406-255-7162

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

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P.O. Box 88199
Seattle, WA 98138-2199
425-656-9797, Fax: 425-656-5999

SOUTHEAST

Serves: AL, FL, GA, MS, SC
1624 Metropolitan Circle, Suite B
Tallahassee, FL 32308
850-386-3435, Fax: 850-386-4534

SOUTHWEST

Serves: AR, AZ, LA, NM, OK, TX
3001 LBJ Freeway, Suite 224
Dallas, TX 75234
972-488-2964, Fax: 972-488-2965

WEST COAST

Serves: CA, HI, NV
P.O. Box 417220
Sacramento, CA 95841-7220
916-344-1710, Fax: 916-344-1808

Family Life

MATING typically begins for both red foxes and gray foxes in January or February. Gestation is 51–53 days. In both species the male helps rear the pups. Some young may move away from their birthplaces before winter, but this appears to be a highly variable activity.

Female gray foxes will dig if necessary, but they prefer to den in clefts, small caves, rock piles, or hollow logs. Female red foxes will establish a maternity site by digging or cleaning out a previously used den. Extra dens may be prepared for use in case of disturbance. Red fox parents may have one or more “helpers” who bring food to pups. In general, as we learn more about foxes through careful and patient research, we find more and more evidence of rich and complex social lives.



Human Health Concerns

Foxes are susceptible to several diseases that can affect humans and their companion animals, including rabies, canine distemper, and mange. In some areas foxes carry the Echinococcosis tapeworm, which can cause a serious and sometimes fatal disease in humans.

Rabies

Foxes are classified as a rabies vector species, along with raccoons, coyotes, skunks, and bats. In spite of all the concern and fear surrounding this disease, advances in public education, vaccination of pets, quick response and action when needed by animal control professionals, and post-exposure treatment have greatly reduced its risk to humans.

Echinococcosis Tapeworm

Echinococcosis granulosus is a tapeworm found in foxes and other canid species in many parts of the world, including the western United States. Humans can be infected through contact with host animals, although this is rare in North America. Effective treatments exist, but prevention is as simple as practicing good hygiene and minimizing direct contact with host species.

Distemper

This disease, which can also affect some pets, is similar to rabies but does not pose a threat to humans. Contact your veterinarian to discuss any concerns, and make sure that your pets are vaccinated against this and other diseases.

Sarcoptic Mange

Foxes are quite susceptible to a parasitic disease called sarcoptic mange or canine scabies. It is caused by a microscopic mite, *Sarcoptes scabiei*, that infests the skin. The resulting itching is so severe that infected animals will bite and scratch themselves constantly. Often a secondary bacterial infection results, which can be followed by the onset of conjunctivitis. Foxes with mange are highly noticeable, both because of the hair loss and their apparently bold behavior, as animals suffering from this disease may be out and about at all times of the day. Left untreated, the animal may die in as little as four months. Domestic dogs, if infected, can be treated effectively by a veterinarian.

The HSUS provides fact sheets on a variety of topics. For additional information contact:

**THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES**

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www.hsus.org ■ www.wildneighbors.org