

The Red and Gray Fox

There are five species of foxes found in North America but only two, the red (*Vulpes vulpes*), and the gray (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) live in towns or cities. Foxes are canids and close relatives of coyotes, wolves and domestic dogs. Foxes are not large animals, the red fox is the larger of the two typically weighing 7 to 15 pounds, and reaching as much as 3 feet in length (not including the tail, which can be as long as 1 to 1 and a half feet in length). Gray foxes rarely exceed 11 or 12 pounds and are often much smaller. Coloration among foxes greatly varies, and it is not always a sure bet that a red colored fox is indeed a “red fox” and a gray colored fox is indeed a “gray fox.” The one sure way to tell them apart is the white tip of a red fox’s tail.



Gray Fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*)



Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

Regardless of which fox both prefer diverse habitats, including fields, woods, shrubby cover, farmland or other. Both species readily adapt to urban and suburban areas. Foxes are primarily nocturnal in urban areas but this is more an accommodation in avoiding other wildlife and humans. Just because you may see it during the day doesn’t necessarily mean it’s sick. Sometimes red fox will exhibit a brazenness that is so overt as to be disarming. 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 like many urban adapted species have a wide variety of plant and animal matter in their diet. Although they are a very capable hunter, at some times of the year fruits will be more frequent elements of their diet. Smaller animals such as mice, voles, squirrels, rabbits, birds, frogs, crayfish and insects are eaten; they will also eat carrion and feed on human garbage.

Both red and gray foxes dig dens mostly for raising kits, but also to use as shelter from severe winter weather. Dens under porches, decks or sheds are not uncommon in urban areas. If you find a fox family in an inconvenient spot, consider allowing them to stay until the young are old enough to begin accompanying their parents on foraging outings. Foxes have litters usually born in April or late March. As many as 8 or as few as 3 kits are born to a litter. The kits are weaned by 9 weeks old and then begin to hunt and forage with their parents. They will remain nearby the parents until late summer or early fall before dispersing to establish their own territories.

Foxes aren't dangerous to humans, except when they are rabid, which is very rare. Although foxes sometimes succumb to rabies, the good news is that the fox strain of the disease has **rarely if ever been transmitted to a human in this country**. Luckily, post-exposure treatment is 100% effective if promptly administered. Having your domestic animals vaccinated is the most important thing you can do to protect them, yourself and others against rabies.

Before calling to report a fox or ask for assistance, take time to observe the fox's behavior, and look for these signs:

- Partial paralysis or the inability to use their limbs well.
- Circling or staggering as if drunk.
- Self-mutilation.
- Acting aggressively for no reason.
- Acting unnaturally tame.

If you observe these signs, do not approach the fox—remember exposure to rabies is primarily through bites or saliva. Contact your local animal control agency, police department or health department if you see a fox showing the above signs.

Mange is an extremely debilitating affliction caused by microscopic parasites called *Sarcoptes scabiei* mites, that result in either patchy or entire hair loss.

The disease causes intense irritation of the skin to the point where foxes have been known to chew their own tails off trying to relieve the itching. At advanced stages, infected foxes are often seen wandering around during the daytime, seemingly unafraid.

A mange-stricken fox may be mistaken for a rabid one because of their sickly appearance and seeming lack of fear. Mange-afflicted animals try to maintain their body temperature seeking any warm places they can find. Death may arise from a wide variety of causes, including starvation and hypothermia.

Foxes need an intact winter coat to survive winter's weather extremes, yet the mites prefer skin with little hair. So as the condition worsens and more hair is lost, the mites will eventually take over the animal's whole body.

More detailed information about foxes can be found online at: www.humanesociety.org or <http://www.pgc.pa.gov/Wildlife/WildlifeSpecies/Pages/default.aspx>