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Foxes

In the past, foxes were pursued by trappers for their fur and by hunters as game animals. They were persecuted for taking livestock and had bounties offered for their capture. Today, management approaches and public attitudes towards foxes and other predators have changed drastically. While hunting of furbearers is still permitted, it is highly regulated to ensure the long-term viability of populations. Despite past suppression efforts, foxes continue to thrive, even in developed areas, and remain an important part of our ecosystem.

Two species of fox reside in Rhode Island, the gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) and the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*). Seeing one of these beautiful animals in the wild has become a valued and exciting experience.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Red foxes are present in most of North America, except for the Southwest and the Rocky Mountains. They generally prefer more open habitat, including agricultural fields, golf courses and suburban lawns. The gray fox has a more southerly distribution, mostly absent from Canada but extending into South America. Historically, gray foxes were more commonly found in forested habitats such as deciduous woodlands and swamps.
Today both species are often found in the same habitat, including highly urbanized areas. Home range sizes for foxes are usually no larger than 5 square miles.

In Rhode Island, both fox species can be found in all mainland communities. The red fox can also be found on Aquidneck Island, Jamestown, and Prudence Island in Narragansett Bay. The gray fox has previously only been reported to occur in Jamestown, as noted in the Mammals of Rhode Island (1962), but there are no recent records for the species from Conanicut Island. Neither species can be found on the smaller islands of Narragansett Bay or Block Island.

Food Habits: Foxes have varied, omnivorous diets which include; small mammals, birds, fruit, insects and occasionally carrion (dead animals). During the summer, their scat may be composed entirely of fruit seeds and skins, while in the winter there may only be fur and bone. Foxes will readily eat cat food, garbage or any available food sources, including small pets or unsecured livestock.

Behavior: Foxes are mostly crepuscular (active during dawn and dusk) or nocturnal. Both foxes use distinct and varied vocalizations to communicate. The gray fox mostly uses barks while the red fox uses yaps, yips, howls, barks and "screams" which are often wrongly assumed to be the fisher (*Pekania pennanti*). Both species mark their territory with urine and feces, leaving "signposts" for other foxes in the area.

WHICH FOX IS WHICH?
Gray vs. Red Fox

Both fox species have elongated snouts, pointed ears and bushy tails with white on cheeks and bellies. Both can live 4-5 years. Foxes can range from 27-45 inches in length, and 6-15 pounds in weight.

The gray fox (photo on next page) is stockier with shorter legs, and has gray fur "peppered" with reddish-brown on the backs of its ears, sides, chest and legs. The tail is black-tipped.

The red fox (above) is slender with longer legs, and has orange-red fur with black on the feet and the backs of its ears. Fur color can vary to grayish-black. The tail is white-tipped.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The "screaming" call foxes make is often mistaken as the sound of a fisher.
- Gray foxes use their forelimbs and rear claws to climb trees, they can even leap from branch to branch.
- Red foxes frequently use dens originally created by woodchucks.
- Foxes will bury food in caches and mark the location with urine to ward off other predators.
- In the United States there are both native red foxes and ancestors of introduced European red foxes from Colonial times.

Reproduction: Foxes form permanent pair bonds and are mainly monogamous. Both parents participate in caring for their young. Foxes use dens in the mating and reproductive seasons, but do not often use them the rest of the year. Red foxes may dig their own dens or often improve on an abandoned woodchuck den. These are often located under sheds elevated on blocks. Gray foxes generally utilize dense underbrush, hollow trees, and rock crevices to rear young.
The male brings food to the den for the female and pups. For gray foxes the average litter size is four, and for red foxes it is five. The pups are blind until they open their eyes at 10-12 days. Females nurse the pups up until 3 weeks, at which time both parents will begin providing them with solid foods. Around three months, the pups start to hunt on their own, and begin to disperse. Males do so earliest and travel farther than the females. Mating season for red foxes is January - April, and December - March for gray foxes.

REGULATORY STATUS

Neither the red nor the gray fox is endangered or threatened. In Rhode Island, foxes are classified as protected furbearers under *RIGL 20-16-1*. They may be trapped or hunted using legal methods during the regulated season. In Rhode Island, state law (*RIGL 20-16-2*) allows a property owner to kill, by legal means, any furbearer (as defined in *RIGL 20-16-1*) that is killing or attempting to kill any livestock or domestic animals, destroying crops, creating a health hazard, or causing economic damage to their property. However, the law does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the DEM within 24 hours. The DEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. **State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers.** Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured.

LIVING WITH FOXES

A common complaint from homeowners is that foxes have denned under a toolshed or other area close to their home. Foxes are not aggressive towards people and attacks on people are extremely rare. These den sites are only temporary and when the young are old enough, the site will be abandoned.

To prevent future use of the sites:

- Fill in holes and install fencing around the bottom of sheds, porches and buildings.
- Remove brush piles or other debris.
- Remove any food sources.

TIPS TO PROTECT LIVESTOCK AND PETS

- Bring all animals in before dark
- Bury enclosure fencing at least 1ft down on all sides
- Cover the top of outdoor enclosures
- Frequently check enclosures for holes
- Remove other potential food sources:
- Outdoor pet dishes, unsecure trash bins, compost piles

NEVER INTENTIONALLY FEED WILDLIFE

This causes problems for both humans and wildlife.

Gray fox, captured by one of RIDFW's many trail cameras during our bobcat study, in collaboration with the University of Rhode Island