

Foxes in the City

Vulpes vulpes

Identification:

Red foxes are the largest of the true foxes, weighing 6 to 24 lbs. Thick soft fur and long legs often makes them look larger to people. Commonly a rusty red on top, they can be found in many shades of orange to gray. Look for a white underbelly, black ear tips and legs, and a bushy tail with a distinctive white tip.



Natural history:

The red fox has the widest range of any carnivore; they are found throughout North America, Europe, Asia, N. Africa, Japan and have even been introduced to Australia. They were originally native in the northern evergreen forests of North America, and have expanded all over the country. European foxes were also introduced in the eastern U.S. in the late 1600's and moved into U.S. ecosystems. They can be found in diverse habitats from forests, grasslands, mountains, deserts and adapt well to living around people.

Diet:

Foxes are solitary hunters whose diet is as varied as their habitat. Insects, small mammals, birds, snakes, fish, frogs, fruits, vegetables, garbage and pet food are all potential food sources. Big ears means excellent hearing, and they can locate small animals by sound in tall grass, then make tall leaps to pounce on prey. Foxes will commonly “cache” or bury excess food in shallow holes to save for leaner times. Due to their small size, they eat 1-2 lbs of food a day. Predation on pets is rare, most pets being too big for the foxes.

Breeding:

Locally foxes breed in January to February, with 2 to 12 kits being born after almost a two month gestation period, in March through May. Kits are born blind, their eyes are open by two weeks and the kits have taken their first exploratory steps out of the den by five weeks; by ten weeks they are fully weaned. Both parents will raise the kits through the summer, and then they will disperse the following fall. Sometimes daughters stay around with mom if there is enough food. Urban foxes often stay together because of the large amounts of food and shelter available.



Behavior in urban environments:

Foxes become more nocturnal (active at night) in areas with a lot of people, and are generally crepuscular (out in the early morning and evening) but can be out at any time of the day. They are territorial, and will maintain several dens throughout their territory, with one larger den used for giving birth and raising kits. Dens are used every year and

often passed on through generations. They generally avoid contact with people, but may initiate play with pets. They also have been known to “tease” dogs, barking and racing around outside of their reach. When a fox is fed, they can become too comfortable and bold around people. When this happens a fox is more likely to bite or be injured by dogs, cars or people. To keep foxes safe when living in a city people should chase them off if they are approached.

Danger from foxes:

Danger to small pets is possible, although typically rare. Pets under 10 lbs would be most vulnerable to predation. Foxes typically avoid human contact and are easily scared. If a fox approaches, yelling and waving your arms should frighten it off. When intentionally or accidentally fed, foxes can become aggressive. Remember that food means survival to wildlife and they will do what they need to do to survive.

It is not uncommon for playful foxes to initiate play with dogs or cats.



Creating an aggressive fox

Benefits:

Foxes prey on grubs, grasshoppers, mice, rats, voles and pocket gophers, helping manage pest populations. They also eat Canada goose eggs, which have become overpopulated in city parks. They can be entrancing to watch, and since they use the same dens for generations, a fox family can become a beloved part of neighborhoods. They provide opportunities for children and residents to view wildlife and nature in their own backyards, while developing appreciation of the interesting, intelligent and playful antics of their furry neighbors.

What to do when living with foxes:

It is illegal to feed foxes in Denver.

Never feed foxes

1. Feed pets indoors.
2. Keep garbage and compost in securely closed cans or inside.
3. Clean up fruit that's fallen to the ground.
4. Clean under bird feeders and barbecue grills regularly.
5. Enclose poultry & rabbits in secure pens.

Make your yard unattractive to foxes.

1. Use flood lights or motion activated lights.
2. Human and pet activity will discourage foxes from entering yard.
3. Use ammonia soaked rags in trash cans or in areas where foxes have been visiting.
4. Play a radio.
5. Keep fence well maintained so fox cannot slip underneath it. Add deterrents such as wire on top of fence to keep them from climbing over.
6. Trim vegetation high off ground to reduce cover.

If a fox is teasing your pet.

1. Keep pet inside for a few days, the fox will lose interest and not return.
2. Yell, wave a broom, bang on a pot to make noise to scare it away.
3. Be consistent, foxes are extremely intelligent and will learn locations where they are not welcome.

Colorado Division of Wildlife does not allow relocation of red fox.

Resources:

Animal Diversity Web: http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Vulpes_vulpes.html

Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_fox

National Geographic: animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/red-fox.html

Urban Wildlife Rescue: <http://www.urbanwildliferescue.org/humane/foxes.htm>

