

## Species Profile...

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### The Summer of Foxes



It was the summer of foxes. We saw foxes everywhere we went- foxes in Minnesota, foxes in east Texas, and foxes in Big Bend National Park.

A biologist in Minnesota showed us a den with a family of red foxes. The foxes had burrowed their den in a bluff along a country road overlooking a lake. My wife was leading a wildflower photography tour, but the tour members were delighted to point their cameras at the foxes and their pups coming out of the den.

A friend in east Texas had a gray fox coming to her backyard. She fed the fox cat food, and by and by, the female fox brought her pups to feast on the ready-made meals.

Out in Big Bend National Park, we saw a family of gray foxes foraging around the Chisos Basin almost every evening at dusk. One day, we ferreted out their den. We had closely watched their movements in and out of a mountain ravine. We hiked into the ravine, following narrow animal paths trodden in the grass. Then we heard a group of mockingbirds squawking frenetically near an alligator juniper. (The mockingbirds were engaged in a behavior called, mobbing, in which they create a raucous around a predator.) Sure enough, we found the fox den in a burrow under a small boulder next to the alligator juniper.

Knowing that fox dens have multiple entrances, we eventually found one entrance about 30 feet away under the exposed roots of a pinyon pine and another entrance about 20 feet up the side of the ravine. There were probably more entrances, but we left the foxes in peace---except for the screeching mockingbirds.

Foxes build dens in a variety of places. They can dig burrows 75 feet long that have food storage chambers and over a dozen secret entrances. Often, foxes will merely modify the abandoned burrow of another animal like a badger rather than dig their own burrow. Foxes also build dens in the hollows of trees, clumps of brush, abandoned buildings, and log piles. A gray fox may build a den in the hollow of a tree 10 feet off the ground. The gray fox is the only member of the dog family in North America that can climb trees, and hence its nickname, tree fox.

Both species of foxes we saw this summer---the gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) and the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)---are common in North America. The gray fox has the widest range, occurring from southern Canada all the way to South America. The red fox occurs in most parts of North America north of Mexico.

We looked for signs of the tiny kit fox (*Vulpes macrotis*) that occurs in the Big Bend region of Texas, but this was not our year to see it. The similar swift fox (*Vulpes velox*) of the Great Plains is likely the same species as the kit fox, but we haven't seen that one either. Nor have we seen the Arctic fox (*Alopex lagopus*) that frequently lives on ice sheets.

Foxes are members of the canine family that includes dogs, coyotes, and wolves. Unlike other canines, foxes have yellow eyes with

elliptical, cat-like pupils. Their eyes are an obvious adaptation for nocturnal hunting.

We noticed that foxes have other characteristics similar to cats. They're stealthy and silent in their movements. We noticed by their tracks that they have a gait similar to cats---the paw prints running in a straight line, the front and hind prints overlapping, and the nearly undetectable claw prints due to the fact that fox claws that are semi-retractable.

The foxes we saw looked like overgrown cats. They were small animals about 3-½ feet long from head to tail and probably weighed between 7 and 13 pounds. The coarse, gray hair on the gray foxes had a salt-and-pepper appearance due to the mixture of black and white bands in their guard hairs. Their bellies had an iron-red color. They had long, bushy, ruddy-gray tails with a black tip and a black strip running vertically down the top.

The red foxes had fur that seemed less coarse than gray foxes. Their backs were reddish-orange, their undersides whitish, and their bushy tails white tipped. We saw the typical ruddy hue of red foxes, but red foxes do have a variety of color variations. The most famous color variation is the "silver fox" that has black fur accented by white-tipped guard hairs.

Both red and gray foxes are omnivorous, feeding on rodents, rabbits, snakes, insects, birds, bird eggs, fruits, and berries. Chicken farmers used to consider the fox the bane of their chicken coop---from whence came the expression, "As dangerous as a fox in a hen house." Actually, scientific studies of fox feeding behavior showed that domestic chickens never made up much of a fox's diet. Besides, modern poultry farming makes it nigh to impossible for a fox to raid a hen house.

What surely can charm us about foxes is that they are monogamous. A male (dog) and a female (vixen) form a pair bond and mate in the winter. After the female gives birth in the spring, both parent foxes raise the pups (kits). In autumn, the young disperse and the parent foxes wander off as solitary hunters---foxes are not pack animals like dogs and wolves. But come winter, the parent foxes come back together to raise another litter of pups. The mated pair repeats this cycle for life.

The foxes we saw this summer in their dens were families, parent foxes raising their young, patterning a behavior designed for all creatures, man and animals, to multiply their kind upon the earth.

*About the image...*

Nikon N90s camera  
300mm/2.8 lens  
SB-24 speedlight  
Gitzo Tripod/Arca-Swiss Ball Head  
Fuji Velvia, 1/60th at f/2.8

Gary Clark and Kathy Adams Clark - NPN 134

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