

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

WILDLIFE FACT SHEET

Gray Fox

Urocyon cinereoargenteus

Background

When the colonists arrived, Connecticut was home to both native gray and red foxes. The red fox was an inhabitant of mixed forests and open areas, while the gray fox inhabited more dense woodlands. The abandonment of farmland in Connecticut during the 1800s and subsequent regrowth of woodlands resulted in an increase in the gray fox population for many decades. However, the gray fox population is currently undergoing a range-wide decline, and biologists across the east coast are attempting to determine the cause. Leading theories are maturing forests, disease (distemper and/or rabies), and competition from coyotes (coyotes did not appear in the eastern United States until around the mid-1900s).

The CT DEEP Wildlife Division is currently collecting sighting reports of gray foxes to help biologists determine the distribution and abundance of this native fox. Report sightings online at <https://portal.ct.gov/DEEP/Wildlife/Report-a-Wildlife-Sighting>.

Range

The gray fox occurs from extreme southern Canada throughout the United States, except in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and most of Washington. It ranges into Mexico and Central America.

Description

Foxes have pointed ears, an elongated snout (shorter and more cat-like in appearance in the gray fox than the red fox), and a long, bushy tail which is carried horizontally. The gray fox is somewhat stout and has shorter legs than the red fox. Its coat is mostly grizzled gray. Reddish-brown fur occurs along the sides of the neck, back of the ears, a band across the chest, inner and back surfaces of the legs, feet, sides of the belly, and under surface of the tail. The cheeks, throat, inner ears, and most of the underside are white. The upper part of the tail, including the tip, is black.

An important distinction is that gray foxes do not vary in their pelage, while red foxes vary greatly. The Wildlife



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Division often receives reports of possible “cross foxes” in Connecticut, but those foxes are simply red foxes in a different color phase, not a cross between a red and gray fox.

Gray foxes range in weight from 7 to 14 pounds, with 10 to 11 pounds being average. They measure from 32 to 45 inches in length. Males and females are about equal in size.

Habitat and Diet

Preferred habitats are deciduous woodlands, thickets, and swampy areas.

The gray fox is an omnivore and will feed on rabbits, mice, voles, chipmunks, squirrels, fruits, insects, birds and eggs, carrion, corn, amphibians, and reptiles.

Life History

Foxes breed from January through March with the gray fox tending to breed two to four weeks later than the red fox. After an average gestation period of 53 days, the female fox gives birth to a litter averaging 4 or 5 pups. The gray fox usually does not use an underground den but, instead, dens in dense brush, cavities in stumps and trees, rock crevices, or under out-buildings, such as barns and sheds. Most foxes have more than one den and will readily move their young if disturbed.

The pups stay in the den until about 4 to 5 weeks of age, after which they emerge and begin to play outside the den entrance. Both adults care for the young by bringing food and guarding the den site. At about 12 weeks of age, the pups are weaned and join the adults on hunting forays, learning to catch food for themselves. In the fall, the young disperse from the family unit and will usually breed in the first spring after they are born.

Interesting Facts

Gray foxes are not observed as frequently as red foxes due to their reclusive nature and more nocturnal habits. They tend to be active from the late evening hours until dawn.

Gray foxes will readily climb trees, jumping from branch to branch while hunting or for protection. They have semi-retractable claws.

In Connecticut, the normal home range for a fox is about 2 to 4 square miles, but it may vary depending on the abundance of food.

The gray fox has a voice like the red fox, but barks or yaps less often than the red fox and its voice is louder.

Foxes are important predators of prolific prey species, like mice, rats, and rabbits. Adult foxes have few predators; feral dogs and coyotes likely will not tolerate foxes within their territories. The relationship between gray foxes and coyotes has not been well studied.

Gray foxes can carry organisms that are responsible for some contagious diseases, such as rabies and distemper (gray foxes are highly susceptible to distemper). They are, however, resistant to sarcoptic mange, which can often seriously affect red foxes and coyotes. Mange is caused by a microscopic mite that lives in the skin. Animals with mange lose hair and weight, and their skin becomes cracked and encrusted with heavy scabs. Infected red foxes and coyotes usually die from the affliction within 2 to 4 months.

Raccoon rabies is the most common strain of rabies found in Connecticut. Raccoons are the primary carrier, but foxes can also be infected. Foxes are the primary carrier of different strains of rabies that occur in other regions of North America. Most foxes die from rabies too quickly to spread the disease to other animals or humans. Nevertheless, animals that appear sick or are acting abnormally should be avoided. The following symptoms may indicate the presence of rabies or other neurological diseases in mammals: unprovoked aggression, impaired movement, paralysis or lack of coordination, unusually friendly behavior, and disorientation. The local animal control officer or police should be contacted if assistance is needed with a potentially rabid animal. If you are unable to contact local authorities, call DEEP's 24-hour Dispatch Center at 860-424-3333.

Living with Foxes

Foxes commonly live in close association with human residences and communities where they can find plenty of food, water, and cover. They (mostly red foxes) frequently inhabit yards, parks, and golf courses, especially areas that adjoin suitable, undeveloped habitat. Foxes can become accustomed to human activity

but are seldom aggressive toward people. Problems include depredation on domestic animals, perceptions of danger to humans (healthy foxes pose virtually no danger to humans), and their potential to carry disease organisms. The mere presence of a fox should not be perceived as a problem and foxes need not be feared. However, those who are uncomfortable with the presence of foxes can take certain actions to reduce the chance of problems:

- Do not allow pets to run free! Keep cats indoors, particularly at night, and small dogs on a leash and under close supervision at all times.
- NEVER feed foxes! DO NOT put out food for any animals. Feed pets indoors. Clean up fruit dropped from trees and bird seed below feeders. Secure garbage in animal-proof containers and store it in a garage or shed. Feeding, whether direct or indirect, can cause foxes to act tame and may lead to bold behavior over time.
- Close off crawl spaces under decks and sheds. Foxes will use these areas for resting and raising young.
- Protect livestock. Foxes will prey on small livestock, such as ducks, chickens, rabbits, and young lambs, but generally do not bother larger livestock. Livestock can be protected with secure pens, coops, or fencing. Make sure the enclosures prevent entry from above and below as foxes will dig or squeeze under poorly maintained fences and may climb over small fences. Most predation occurs at night, so it is particularly important to provide protection at that time. Some electric fence designs can provide good protection and will deter other predators like coyotes and black bears.
- Use frightening techniques. Human presence often is a deterrent to foxes. Foxes that travel into residential yards can be harassed or scared with loud noises, bright lights, or spraying water from a hose. Disturbing a den site physically or with unnatural odors (e.g., moth balls) during spring may prompt foxes to move to another den which may be farther away.

Trapping and Hunting

Foxes are classified as furbearer species, and thus Connecticut has established regulated hunting and trapping seasons. Hunting and trapping can be used to regulate fox populations while providing recreational opportunities for sportsmen and women. Nationally, millions of dollars are generated every year from fox pelt harvests. The silky, dense fur of the red fox is more valued than the fur of the gray fox, which is coarse and thin.

Live-trapping and relocating foxes is not recommended because the state's fox population and fox "problems" are widespread, and relocated foxes can cause problems in new locations. Removing problem foxes through trapping or hunting is only recommended during designated seasons or in situations where individual foxes show a pattern of preying on livestock.

