



# FURITIVE FOXES

By Joe Rogerson  
*Photos by Danny Mayan*

**D**ID YOU KNOW that there are actually two species of fox found in Delaware? Most people think the red fox is the only fox species found in the First State, but also living in Delaware's wooded areas are gray foxes. Red foxes are normally reddish in color but they can also have coats that are a shade of gray. Conversely, gray foxes are typically gray in color but can also have reddish highlights. So how do you tell the difference? The best way to differentiate red foxes from gray foxes is by the hair color at the tip of the animal's tail. The tail tip

on a red fox is white, whereas a gray fox has a black tipped tail.

## **Where they came from**

Gray foxes are actually native animals to Delaware, while red foxes were brought over from Europe and released by early colonists at the beginning of the 17th century. While red foxes are native to parts of North America, historically they were only found in the northern and mountainous regions in the west. They would not have been found in Delaware.

Recently there is some evidence that

along with the introduced red foxes from Europe, the native red fox that was historically found in the northern regions of the U.S. has recently seen a range expansion due to habitat alteration, particularly the conversion of forested land to agriculture. With this conversion, the habitat preferred by red foxes is more abundant so they have been able to expand their range south. Delaware, however, is not likely to be inhabited by foxes from both places.

## **Where they live**



Red foxes are normally reddish in color but they can also have coats that are a shade of gray.

Most people are familiar with red foxes because they are seen regularly since they are highly adaptable and prefer to live in dense areas of bushes and saplings, and forest edges which comprise a large portion of Delaware's landscape. Because they are so highly adaptable, they are also very comfortable living in suburban areas in the state.

Unlike red foxes, gray foxes prefer to live in forested areas away from the forest edge. Many of the forested woodlots in Delaware are too small to be preferred by gray foxes so they are most likely to be

found in our largest contiguous forested blocks. Since gray foxes prefer to live in the interior of forests and are generally more nocturnal than red foxes, plus the fact that the gray fox population is much lower than that of the red fox, they are even more difficult to find. A good place in Delaware to find gray foxes would be in and around Redden State Forest, in Georgetown.

### Similarities and differences

While the red and gray fox prefer different habitat types, both are active year-round and they share similar diet preferences. Both species are omnivores, meaning they eat both plants and animals. Both species will consume small mammals, fruits, nuts, vegetation, and even insects. In the case of hunting live prey, both species stalk their prey and when the moment is right, will pounce and hopefully capture their target.

The major difference between red and gray foxes is the gray fox's ability to climb trees. Gray foxes are very agile climbers and will climb trees, even vertically as a gray squirrel would. Gray foxes will climb trees in search of food and to avoid

predators. In addition to jumping from tree limb-to-limb, gray foxes will use their front legs to wrap around a tree and their hind legs to push and propel them up a vertical tree trunk. Unlike squirrels that descend from a tree head first, gray foxes will climb down tail first.

Both red and gray foxes share similar breeding habits in that they both typically breed in February and March, and have litters of three to six individuals. However, even though both animals are considered foxes, they can't interbreed with one another, just like a cat and dog can't reproduce with each other. Gray foxes are generally slightly shorter than red foxes but their more stocky build causes them to have similar weights of 7-15 pounds and to be 30-44 inches long from the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail. The tail generally makes up half of the animal's total body length.

### Foxes and people

As with most wildlife, both red and gray foxes are generally more afraid of people than we are of them. Most will try to avoid humans and remain undetected. However, as Delaware's rural landscape is



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**Because red foxes are so adaptable, they are comfortable living in suburban areas.**



converted to developed areas, all wildlife are increasingly forced to live in and around humans, particularly red foxes. Furthermore, the red fox's highly adaptable nature makes it a great candidate to live close to our homes, often too close for some.

An animal has two primary goals in life, to survive and reproduce. In order to survive, it needs three primary things: food, water, and shelter. In an attempt to maximize its chance for survival it looks for these three things in the easiest manner possible. This means that red foxes



**Foxes typically breed in the winter and have litters of three to six kits.**

are likely to live closer to our houses if there is an easy and abundant supply of food and/or water. Why would a fox continue to try and hunt for animals if it can find an easy meal or drink of water when household trash has been carelessly left outside, or food and water for a household pet is left outside?

### What to watch out for

Like any mammal, foxes can be carriers of rabies and other disease which can be transmitted to people and pets. To reduce the chance of you or your pets contracting one of these diseases, try to eliminate food and water around your house and foxes will be less likely to live so close to your home. While red and gray foxes generally would not attempt an attack on a pet, they are wild animals and wild

animals are unpredictable. If they feel threatened or are very hungry they may attack, particularly smaller dog breeds and cats. The preferred food sources for both of these animals are small mammals (mice, voles, and rabbits) so most pets are too large to be on a fox's dinner menu.

### Problem fox: what to do

If you have a fox that is venturing closer to your home than you would like, you will need to haze – or harass – the animal and instill a fear of people. No animal will likely want to live in an area where it is constantly harassed if it has a quieter place it can go to. Hazing can consist of clapping your hands, waving your arms, yelling at the animal, or any other loud noise that would frighten the animal. In conjunction with hazing, make sure

there isn't any food or water available outside your home that foxes could likely be using. Hazing works best if it is done each and every time the animal is encountered and is more effective if your neighbors get involved. If you're vigilant, the problem animals will quickly get the hint that the area around your home is not a safe and quiet place to live and will find a new place to establish their territory.

### A lucky sighting

Due to the high red fox population and the type of habitat they prefer, it is relatively easy to see one of them while driving down the road or even possibly from the window of your house. However, if you want to catch a glimpse of Delaware's native and more secretive fox,

you will likely need to put on your boots and venture into the woods. The larger the wooded area the more likely you are to encounter a gray fox and your best time to encounter one would be dawn and dusk, since they are more nocturnal than red foxes. Remember, the gray fox is shy and not as widely spread in Delaware so if you are able to catch a glimpse of this beautiful creature, you are one of the lucky ones. **OD**

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