

NATURE DETECTIVES



Winter 2020

A Gray Fox in a Tree

The two young friends shed their backpacks and plopped down on opposite sides of a flat rock. Jamie gazed up at a gnarled, old aspen tree next to the trail. "I'd really like to see a gray fox in that tree...or any tree."

Kelly snorted. "Yeah, like that's ever going to happen. Foxes don't climb trees. And, you mean a *red* fox, Jamie. Some red foxes are mostly gray or black."

"I mean *gray* fox," Jamie emphasized. "Gray foxes do climb trees. They're a whole different kind of fox than a red fox. Both kinds live in Boulder County. My tía showed me a photo of a gray fox in a tree and told me all about them."

"How do you know whether it's a gray fox or a gray-furred red fox?" Kelly asked.

Jamie grinned. "The two species look different, but it's easy if you check out the tail. Red foxes always have a white-tipped tail. Gray foxes have a black-tipped tail. Gray foxes have a wild-looking black stripe down their back too. And, remember, gray foxes can climb trees! A red fox can't do that!"

"Seriously?" Kelly was still skeptical. "How can they climb trees?"

"Like a cat. Gray foxes have retractable claws." Jamie's fingers curled into pretend cat claws. "You know, they can extend them from their paws like a cat, and pull them back when they don't need them. Long claws make it easy to scramble up leaning trees, but they can climb straight up a tree by hugging it with their front legs, and pushing with their back legs. They are also good at leaping from one tree branch to another."

Kelly wasn't quite convinced. "How do they get down from a tree?"

"They back down, clinging to the trunk with their claws," Jamie said. "Or if the tree is leaning sideways, they just run down the trunk. They are mostly out at night, but maybe we'll see one some time. You ready? Let's go. We can talk more about gray foxes later."



Gray Foxes Look Different From Red Foxes



Gray Fox

Compared to red foxes, gray foxes have shorter legs and a stouter body. Adults measure about three feet long and weigh about ten pounds. Their shorter muzzle and smaller paws give them a more cat-like appearance to go along with their cat-like climbing ability.

Secretive Foxes

Home for gray foxes is in brushy, rocky, hilly areas with some trees and a stream or pond. They inhabit foothills and canyons where shrubs and other plants provide safe hiding places. They are sometimes seen where houses border wild areas, but mostly they steer clear of towns and farms and avoid people.

Gray foxes are generally active in the dark. Most activity begins at dusk and ends at dawn. During daylight, they rest in various, well-hidden spots in thick vegetation.

The Omnivore's Diet

On the hunt for a meal, gray foxes cover ground at a steady trot, only stopping to look, listen, and sniff for prey and danger. True omnivores, they are looking for almost anything edible. If they find more than they can eat, they sometimes bury the extra and mark the spot with urine or scat (feces).

Depending on the season, food may be meat, insects, eggs, or fruits and vegetables. They hunt rabbits, mice, voles, and chipmunks. They capture grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, moths, and butterflies. They dine on birds and bird eggs. They gobble a variety of berries, prickly pears, grasses, grains, and other fruits and plants. Carrion (dead animal) is on the menu too, if it's fresh.

Jamie was right about the tail color of the two fox species, a black tail tip on gray foxes and a white tail tip on red foxes. The black color on a gray fox's tail starts in a mane of stiff, black hairs on top of its back. The stiff hairs continue in a stripe down to the tip of its tail.

Much of the gray fox's coat is grizzled, gray fur and white fur like a mix of salt and pepper. Accents of white, black, brown, and reddish fur cover other parts of its body. Gray foxes grow a shorter, rougher coat than red foxes, but both are thickly furred, including their tail. Their thick coat makes foxes look bigger than they are.



Red Fox

Gray Fox Family Year

Near the end of winter, gray fox adults search for a mate, and often they pair up with the same mate they had the previous year. While the male hunts up meals to share, the female looks for a secure den. She might find an abandoned burrow and dig it to be the right size. An ideal location might be under a rock or brush pile, or in a gap between rocks. A hollow log or a hollow area in a tree could be her choice.

By April or May, the female will give birth to about four furry pups. They are dependent on her milk for at least three months. The male will do most of the hunting for the pair while the pups are tiny.

In about ten days, the pups' eyes open. In a month, the youngsters will start to wander outside the den. They spend much of their time pretend hunting each other. They play chase and attack games. They pounce, nip, bat, and paw each other. A brother's or a sister's tail is a favorite imaginary mouse.

The young foxes eat a regular diet by the time they are three months old. They are taught stalking and pouncing lessons, mostly by their dad. They use those skills to hunt on their own when they are about four months old.



Each parent and pup go their separate ways by fall. They may see each other in winter because family members' territories often overlap. Late winter will find the male and female pairing up once again to begin a new cycle of raising pups.

Can You Hear Me Now?

Short, gruff-sounding barks, growls, yips, and whines are sounds gray foxes use to communicate with each other. Scent glands on their face, under their tail, and on the pads of their paws prove that smells relay important messages too. The information is left on everything foxes rub against.

Pet dogs look for canine news by sniffing places where other dogs have urinated or left feces. Likewise, gray foxes pass on information to other foxes in their urine and scat. Gray foxes tend to hunt and roam alone, but they keep in touch with their relatives and neighbors through their voice and by their scent marking.

Watch Out, Foxes!

Gray foxes can live about ten years. Some foxes suffer worms and other parasites, or they can die from canine diseases, such as distemper.

Adult foxes don't have many predators, but coyotes, bobcats, and golden eagles are a danger. Great horned owls can snatch pups. People hunt, trap, and sometimes poison foxes.



Sherlock Fox asks, “So why DO gray foxes climb trees?”

You could tell Sherlock that gray foxes climb trees to escape coyotes and people. Hungry foxes climb trees to gobble nestling birds and insects. Trees can be a safe place to take a nap or find a hollow den for raising pups. Maybe they sometimes just enjoy the view!

The Nose Knows

Foxes and other animals use their sense of smell much more than we do. See what your nose tells you by trying this experiment:

- Gather a few jars or containers and fill each one with something that has a particular smell. Try foods like garlic or onions, herbs, fruit, meat, or vegetables. Try spices like cinnamon, ginger, cloves or cumin.
- Cover your containers with a cloth or towel so you can't see what is inside.
- Get a family member or friend to join you in the room where you have your containers set up.
- Once you are safely seated, turn off the lights (it needs to be dark enough where you can't see anything in the room). Hold up each container to the other person and see if they can identify what the smell is.

That's how you use your nose in the dark!

Fox Claw Challenge

Think of all the jobs your fingernails do. Fox claws do a lot of work too. A gray fox's claws let it climb like a cat, and the thick claws on a red fox are tough digging tools. Each claw type is handy for certain activities, but not as useful for doing other tasks.

Head outdoors with a friend or family member, and make it a game to spot places where dog-type claws or cat-style claws would work best. If both gray foxes and red foxes lived in your area, what would their claws help the different foxes do? What jobs can sharp, curved, retractable cat claws do, and what jobs can immovable, thick, tough dog claws do?



Cat paw prints



Dog paw prints