



Living With Wildlife

Red Fox & Gray Fox in Massachusetts

The red fox and gray fox are both common and abundant species in Massachusetts. Both can be found throughout the state, except on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket. They prefer landscapes of mixed habitat, and thrive in areas where different habitats — forests, fields, orchards and brush lands — blend together. Foxes typically use the transitional areas between these habitat types for most of their activities.

Foxes are members of the dog family Canidae, and their general appearance is similar to that of domestic dogs and coyotes. Color pictures of both species are available on our website.

Description: The red fox, *Vulpes vulpes*, measures 22 to 32 inches in head and body length, while its bushy tail adds another 14 to 16 in total length. Adults weigh from 6 to 15 pounds, but appear heavier than they actually are.

The red fox is usually recognized by its reddish coat and black "leg-stockings." Red is the most common dominant color, but the coat, up to 3 or 4 inches long, may vary from light yellow to a deep auburn red to a frosted black. The white tip on the tail will distinguish this fox from any other species at any age.

The gray fox, *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*, is often confused with the red fox because of the rusty-red fur on its ears, ruffs and neck. The overall coloration is gray, with the darkest color extending in a suggested stripe along the top of the back down to the end of the tail. The belly, throat, and chest areas are whitish in color.

The gray fox appears smaller than the red fox, but the shorter leg length and stockier body are deceptive. Many gray foxes weigh about the same as red foxes living in similar habitat types. On average, males and females weigh 8 to 11 pounds, and are generally on the



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heavier end of that range in this part of the country. Compared to the red fox, the gray has a shorter muzzle, and shorter ears which are usually held erect and pointed forward. Gray foxes stand about 15 inches tall at the shoulders and average 40-44 inches in length, including a tail of 12 to 15 inches.

While both foxes have some cat-like features that reflect their evolution as small mammal predators (including elliptical pupils for night vision enhancement), the gray fox is the only fox that climbs trees.

Life history: Both species of foxes breed mid January to late February and begin to prepare dens during this time. A den is typically a burrow in the earth, 15 to 20 feet long, and usually located on the side of a knoll, but foxes may also set up dens in or under outbuildings, in rock crevices, or, in the case of the gray, even in trees! Dens may have several entrances. Sometimes foxes dig their own dens, but more often they appropriate and enlarge the tunnels of small burrowing animals such as woodchucks and skunks.

The single, annual litter is born after a gestation period of 53 days. A litter of 4 pups is common. The young leave the den for the first time about a month after birth. The mother gradually weans them, and by 3 months of age, they are learning to hunt on their own. Foxes are quite vocal, having a large repertoire of howls, barks, and whines. The family unit endures until autumn, at which time it breaks up and each animal becomes independent.

Habits: Foxes are usually shy and wary, but they are also curious. Activity is variable; foxes may be active night or day, and sightings at dusk or dawn are common. They remain active all year and do not hibernate. Foxes actively maintain territories that may vary in size from 2 to 7 square miles. Territories are shared by mated pairs and their immature pups, but are actively defended from non-related foxes.

Food: Both the red fox and gray fox are omnivorous. They are opportunistic feeders and their primary foods include small rodents, squirrels, rabbits, birds, eggs, insects, vegetation, fruit and carrion. Foxes cache excess food when the hunting/foraging is good. They return to these storage sites and have been observed digging up a cache, inspecting it, and reburying it in another spot.

Foxes can thrive close to humans and can flourish in suburban/urban areas. They require only a source of food, water, and cover. **If you want to make your property less attractive to foxes and avoid having any problems with these small predators, you should follow these basic practices:**

-  **Secure your garbage.** Foxes will raid open trash materials and compost piles. Secure your garbage in tough plastic containers with tight fitting lids and keep in secure buildings when possible. Take out trash the morning pick up is scheduled, not the previous night. Keep compost in secure, vented containers.
-  **Don't feed or try to pet foxes.** Keep wild things wild! Feeding, whether direct or indirect, can cause foxes to act tame and over time may lead to bold behavior. Foxes that rely on natural food items remain wild and wary of humans.
-  **Keep your pets safe.** Although free roaming pets are more likely to be killed by automobiles than by wild animals, foxes can view cats as potential food. For the safety of your pets, keep them restrained at all times. Keep livestock such as rabbits and chickens in secure enclosures that prevent entry from above and below.
-  **Keep bird feeder areas clean.** Use feeders designed to keep seed off the ground, as the seed attracts many small mammals foxes prey upon. Remove feeders if foxes are regularly seen around your yard.
-  **Feed pets indoors.** Outdoor feeding attracts many wild animals to your door!
-  **Close off crawl spaces under porches and sheds.** Foxes use such areas for resting and raising young.
-  **Don't let foxes intimidate you.** Don't hesitate to scare or threaten foxes with loud noises, bright lights, or spraying water from a hose.
-  **Cut back brushy edges in your yard.** These areas provide prime cover for foxes and their prey.
-  **Educate your neighbors.** Pass this information along; your efforts will be futile if neighbors are providing food or shelter for foxes.

Foxes are important and valuable natural resources in Massachusetts. They are classified as furbearer species, for which regulated hunting seasons and management programs have been established. If you are experiencing problems with foxes, or have any questions regarding them, contact your nearest MassWildlife District Office. Further information on foxes and other native furbearers is also available on our website: www.mass.gov/masswildlife.

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For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646

Connecticut Valley Wildlife Dist., Belchertown: (413) 323-7632

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607

Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145

Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406

Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

or visit our website at www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/facilities/districts

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