

# Living With Foxes

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## FOX FACTS

This canid has well-developed teeth; strong nonretractable claws; and acute senses of smell, sight, and hearing.

The gray (or tree) fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) is common in San Diego County. Foxes have long bodies, relatively short legs, pointed noses, bushy tails, and large, pointed ears. Gray foxes average three to four feet long, including the tail, and weigh 7 to 13 pounds.

Their basic color is grizzled gray with a distinctive black streak along the top to the black tip of the tail. They are rusty yellowish on the feet, legs, sides, neck, and back of the ears.

Gray foxes are found in suburban and rural areas alike; they reside in all the small canyons and brushy areas. They prefer chaparral and open forests and den in hollow logs, beneath boulders, or, sometimes, in ground burrows. They are often seen in areas that are seemingly well populated by humans due to the ever present crush of progress.

Gray foxes are omnivorous, eating small mammals, insects, fruits, birds, eggs, and carrion. They will not harm a domestic adult cat or small dog. They are timid, elusive, and primarily nocturnal.

They are the only true tree-climbers among canids, climbing to sun themselves or to escape predators. They can scale just about any kind of fencing, climb trees, telephone poles, etc. They are sometimes seen on rooftops of houses and buildings. Gray foxes are also good swimmers and can run up to 20 mph.

Territories can vary from 100 to 2,000 acres, depending on habitat quality, food availability, population density, and competition with other species. Gray foxes can live to be six to eight years old, but most die within the first year from disease, predation, accidents, trapping, and hunting. They have a loud bark and also squeal and growl. Their anal scent glands give off a powerful odor.

Foxes' primary enemies are large predators, including eagles, large owls, bobcats, domestic dogs, coyotes, and humans. They will not attack a human but will fight to protect their young. Their defenses include elusiveness; when threatened, gray foxes climb trees. Many foxes are shot or poisoned by farmers concerned about their livestock, or are hunted or trapped for their fur.

Because of dwindling natural habitat, foxes have adapted to living more closely with people. Foxes in the wild normally do not kill more than they need to eat. Foxes perform a valuable service to humans by controlling the small-rodent (mice, gophers, moles, rats) population, so they should be viewed by humans as an ally. Usually this benefit far outweighs the occasional damage they may cause.

Gray foxes mate for life. Both parents share the duties of hunting and caring for their young. Oftentimes one of the parents will do the hunting while the other stays near the den to protect their young from any potential danger. The male will not den with the female and their young, but he is always somewhere close by.

Gray foxes will try to find the safest place they can to have their young -- natural rock and tree cavities,

sometimes under decks, sheds, and small outbuildings. They will usually return to the same den site each year.

Gray foxes with families are only temporary visitors. Once the young are weaned (about 3 months), the parents will relocate their family.

Gray foxes can sometimes be nuisances. Young Gray foxes, just out on their own for the first time, enjoy digging in flowerbeds, marking their new found territories and playing together in your backyard.

## Tips

1. Do not feed the fox. They can easily become dependent on human food sources.
2. Never leave pet food outside.
3. Never discard edible garbage where fox can get to it.
4. Secure garbage containers and eliminate their odors. Use a small amount of ammonia or cayenne pepper in the garbage to discourage scavenging.
5. Restrict use of birdseed. Fox are attracted to it and to the birds and rodents that use the feeder.
6. Foxes den only during breeding season. Be patient and allow them to remain; the parents and young will abandon the den by the time the young are three months old. If you cannot wait that long, any kind of disturbance, such as loud noises and human scent, will likely cause the vixen to move to another den. Once she is aware of the danger, allow her the opportunity to move her young without threat of harm.
7. Make sure the henhouse or other enclosure is well protected. Use heavy- gauge mesh wire to cover up holes in the structures and keep out most potential predators. Since foxes can climb over or dig under fences, a completely closed-in structure is best.
8. Install small gauge wire fencing around the perimeters of decks. Spray an ammonia/water solution under the deck; strategically place mothballs around the area.
9. Trapping is not a good idea. Foxes mate for life, and it is almost a certainty that only one of the mated pair will be caught. Foxes are also territorial; if you trap successfully, other individuals will move into the area.
10. Pick that fruit as soon as it ripens.
11. Battery operated flashing lights, tape recorded human noises, scattered moth balls and ammonia-soaked rags strategically placed may deter foxes from entering your yard.
12. Avoid using pesticides and chemical fertilizers.
13. Do home repairs in the fall. This will prevent nursing babies with vixen from being trapped inside.
14. Clear brush piles from your property.
15. Burying wire or cement blocks around the bottom of a fence will discourage digging.

If you do not mind sharing your space with Gray foxes, enjoy observing them with binoculars when they visit. Watch for movement along hedges, fences, bushes lining streams, and other places where a fox would feel comfortable with cover close by. Foxes living in areas where hunting is forbidden tend to be less shy.

<http://www.projectwildlife.org/living-fox.htm>