

The sly red fox

One of the reasons my wife and I live in Montrose is the outdoor lifestyle and the wild-life. We live in an area where deer, rabbits,



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

quail, geese, coyotes and scores of other wildlife roam freely. Sometimes they roam a bit too freely and raid the garden, but that is a story for another day.

One critter I enjoy viewing from our patio observation deck would have to be the red fox, or *Vulpes vulpes* for you scientific types. Even though they are one of the most common predators in the world, we rarely see one. Dating back to the mid-Pleistocene era, they are survivors. It is believed that the red fox has been in North America for over 400,000 years.

The red fox is common in all of the Northern Hemisphere, from the Arctic Circle to North Africa, and include all of North America. Science has identified 45 subspecies, and recently added another subspecies found in the Sacramento Valley. I am not sure who these people are that identify all these different species of the red fox, but it seems a rather tedious career choice.

These beautiful creatures are one of four species found in Colorado. These include the gray fox, the tiny swift fox and the kit fox. The red fox is the largest and most common, living in riparian woodland and wetlands. They have no problem living with civilization, often staying around the fringe and urban areas.

A red fox will reach 54 to 78 inches in length and tip the scales at 10 to 12 pounds. Their color is usually a reddish/orange on the topsides, with white fur below. Red fox have black ears and feet along with the distinctive black-tipped tail. The tail can make up one third of the foxes total length.

The easiest thing to notice about a red fox is the tail. The tail is made up of very soft, long thick fur, of multiple colors including red, rust, orange, black, gray and white. The tail, also called a brush, is so bushy that the fox will use it as a cover when lying down in the winter.

During the night, you may be lucky enough to hear one of the 12 different



This red fox lives near my house. He is very difficult to get a picture of because he rarely exposes himself. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

sounds a fox makes. The scariest sound is the mating call, which is a sharp, high-pitched screaming noise. If you hear it, you won't soon forget the sound.

The fox builds its den underground, called an "earth" though sometimes they will live above ground in a hollow.

The males are called "dogs" and the females referred to as "vixens," and they mate during the winter. The female will give birth to a litter of up to 12 "kits" during the spring. Both the male and female take care of the kits, until they head off on their own in the fall.

Foxes are omnivores and mainly hunt voles, small rodents, birds and rabbits. They have been known to eat vegetables, fruit and fish. They are always hunting for food, even if they are not hungry. A fox will save its kill until later, for its next meal.

Being a true hunter, the fox has excellent senses. They can actually hear an animal underground. With the long snout, their sense of smell is incredible. A fox will pounce on its prey to catch it.

Foxes are generally nocturnal, which would explain why I hardly ever see them. They are very shy during the daylight hours, hence the nickname "shy fox." In the wild, they generally live up to 5 years, but have been known to reach 15 in captivity. I guess in the wild, even the sly fox has to deal with Murphy and Mother Nature.

Natural predators of the red fox include coyotes, bald eagles, wolves, bears and mountain lions. Unfortunately, the biggest killer of the fox is a motorized vehicle, as many are killed along the highways at night.

Mother Nature has her own way of dealing with foxes, with a couple of the same ailments as domestic dogs. The first is distemper, which is contagious, incurable and usually fatal. It is a viral disease that affects the respiratory, gastrointestinal and central nervous systems. It can be transmitted to humans but anyone who has been immunized against measles is protected.

Another disease common in foxes is rabies. Rabies is almost always transmitted by an animal bite that inoculates the virus into the wound. Anyone who is bit by a fox should wash the wound with soap and water and seek prompt medical attention.

A healthy fox poses no threat to humans. Any animal that appears sick,

demonstrates a lack of fear or acts abnormally should be avoided. Although they appear cute and cuddly, a red fox is a wild animal and should be viewed from a distance.

Foxes have a rather tenuous relationship with people. They have been known to kill small livestock such as chickens, rabbits and young lambs. Small domestic animals may also be a target for a hungry fox, so keep Fifi in the house at night. A fox will dig holes under buildings and fencing in order to gain entry.

I always picture the poor fox being hunted in jolly old England, by a chap wearing a red coat, black hat and riding a horse, following a brace of barking hound dogs who have taken up the trail. Fortunately, this practice was banned due to welfare concerns in 2002 for Scotland, and 2004 in England and Wales.

The fox is considered a furbearer, and hunted for fur. Fox are sometimes raised commercially for their fur value, along with mink and other furbearers. Recently, the red fox has been domesticated in Russia. Forty years in the breeding has led to a fox that can be raised and kept as a family dog. I wish the red fox well, but I think I will stick with my Jack Russells as pets and leave the sly fox in the woods where he belongs.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org



This close-up of a fox tail shows how long and bushy they can be. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

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