

Grey Fox

Urocyon cinereoargenteus



Other common names

Gray fox, tree fox.

Introduction

The grey fox is unique in that it can rotate its forearms and has curved claws, making it the only canid in America capable of climbing trees. This gives them an advantage over other predators that cannot climb trees, allowing them to escape pursuit or access hard to reach prey. Foxes tend to be elusive and cunning, leading to the saying “sly as a fox” to describe people with these same traits.

Physical Description and Anatomy

The grey fox gets its name from its grizzled appearance, resulting from multi-colored guard hairs along its upper parts. It has a white throat and belly, and the tip of its tail is black. It also has distinct black and white markings on its face. The fur on its chest, ears, neck, and sides may be reddish, which can cause those new to wildlife watching to confuse it for the red fox. However, when compared side by side, the differences between the two species are quite distinct. The grey fox has a small head, pointed muzzle, and large, erect ears.

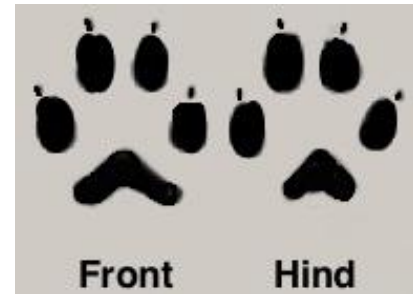
Adult grey foxes weigh about 7 – 14 lbs (3.2 – 6.4 kg), with males and females roughly the same size. Average length is 31 – 45 inches (78.7 – 114.3 cm), and about 1/3 of that is tail.

Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

Grey foxes are easily distinguished from red foxes by color and behavior. Grey foxes have a black tail tip instead of white, and a grizzled grey coloration on their back. Combined with the ability to climb trees, it should be fairly easy to distinguish between the two species.



Grey fox skull.



Grey fox tracks.

Front: $1 \frac{7}{16}$ in long by $1 \frac{3}{16}$ in wide

Hind: $1 \frac{1}{4}$ - $1 \frac{3}{4}$ in long by $1 \frac{7}{16}$ in wide



Red fox pelt (top) and grey fox pelt (bottom).



Close up of red fox fur (top) and grey fox fur (bottom).



Assorted grey fox scat.

Habitat

Grey fox prefer a habitat of deciduous woodlands, mixed with brushy, rocky areas. They may be found on the edges between forest and farmland as well, but are less prevalent in suburban areas than the red fox.

Behavior and Diet

Grey foxes are opportunistic omnivores, feeding on small mammals like mice, voles, and rabbits, as well as birds, amphibians, reptiles, and insects. They will also scavenge carrion, and forage for a variety of hard and soft mast, including acorns, grapes, apples, and even corn. Because the grey fox can climb trees, it feeds on more fruit, nuts, and birds than the red fox does.

Grey foxes are active year-round. They may simply bed down on the ground for parts of the year, but during whelping season they generally use dens to protect their young. Rather than digging their own or expanding abandoned dens, they will use hollow logs and trees, rocky outcroppings, and thick brush piles. They may also use abandoned human structures like houses, sheds, and woodpiles.

As mentioned above, grey foxes are the only canid able to climb trees. This allows them to den several yards up in the tree canopy, rather than sticking to the forest floor. They grip with their front legs, pushing with their back legs, and will even jump from branch to branch. This improves their access to a wider range of food than is available from the ground alone. It also allows them to escape some predators, like coyotes. They may also be preyed upon by bobcats and larger raptors like the great horned owl.

Human Interactions

Grey foxes are found in more rural areas than red foxes, and as such they have less contact with humans. Most interactions result from hunting and trapping, as well as vehicle collisions.

Reproduction

The breeding season for grey foxes runs from mid-January to May. After a gestation of 51 – 63 days, females give birth to a litter of 2 – 7 pups in a den. Males provide assistance by hunting and foraging to provide food. Pups are weaned at 8 – 10 weeks, and start hunting with their parents by 3 months. Juveniles disperse when they are nearly fully grown in autumn. Both males and females are capable of reproduction by the end of their first year. In the wild, the lifespan of the grey fox is generally 6 – 10 years, but in captivity they are capable of living 14 – 15 years.

Fun Facts

Grey foxes are the only canid in America that can climb trees.

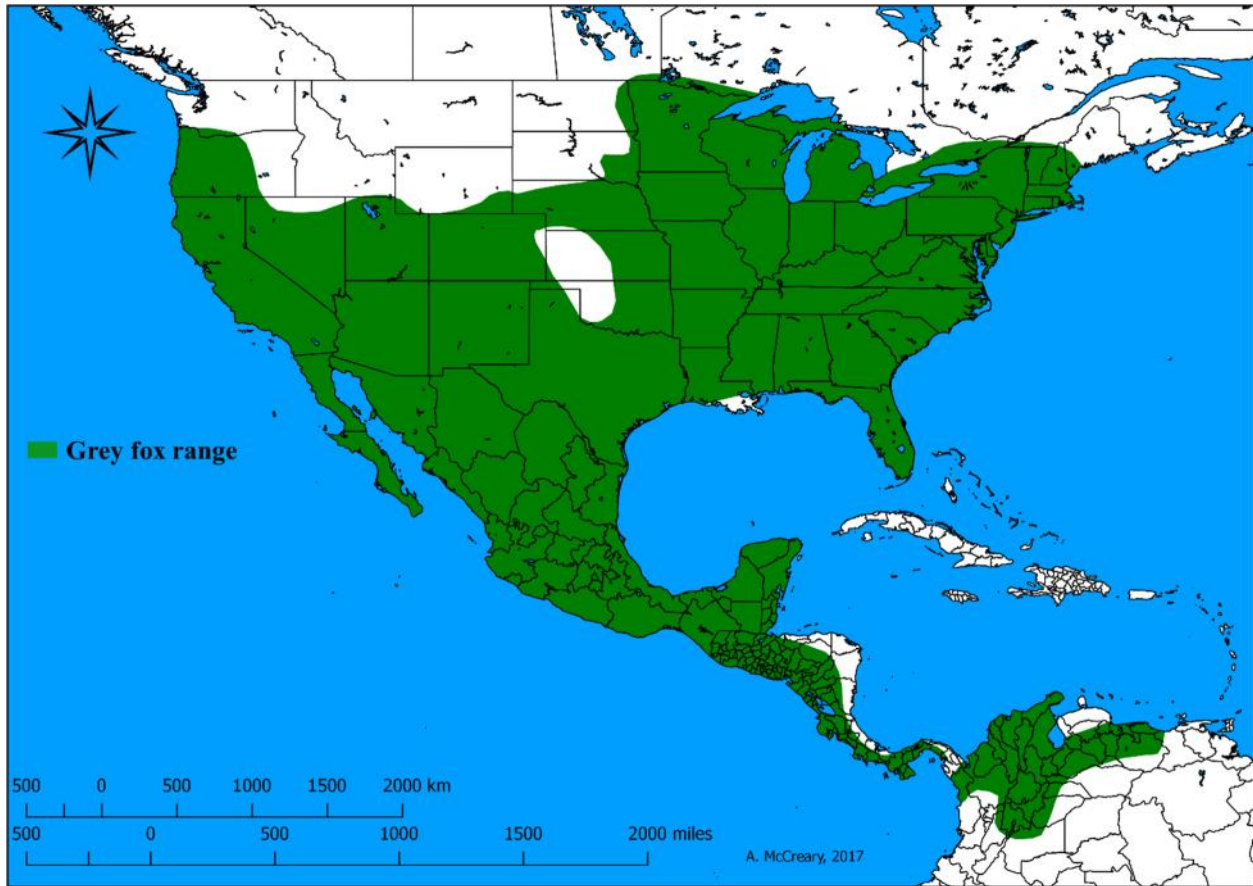
A female fox is known as a vixen.

A group of foxes is called a “skulk” or a “leash”.

Foxes have vertically-slit pupils, like felines, rather than round pupils, like wolves, another member of the canid family.

Range and Status

The grey fox is the only native fox of the United States. It is still very common, but human settlement and deforestation favors expansion of red fox populations in the eastern part of the country. Currently, the grey fox is still more prevalent than the red in western portions of its range. However, a number of external factors, like climate change and habitat fragmentation, have the potential to further reduce existing populations.



Management and Research in New York

Hunting and trapping of grey fox is allowed in New York, along with other small furbearers. Very little active management or research is performed in regards to grey fox.

At Dyken Pond

Grey fox are common at Dyken Pond, but they are more elusive and secretive than the red fox, so they are not seen as often.

Sources

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