



The Gray Fox

The gray fox is a member of the canidae family, which includes doglike animals such as wolves, coyotes, and foxes. But the gray fox, *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*, has one important feature that is unique among all other canids!

Like other foxes, the gray fox has a long, pointed nose and a bushy tail. The hair of a gray fox, however, is more coarse. It is salt & pepper colored on their backs and bodies. Their ears, legs, flanks, sides of their faces, and tails are reddish or rust colored. Their throats & jaws are white. They have a dark spot below each eye, along the sides of their noses, and a black-tipped tail. A black stripe runs down their backs, to the tip of their tails. Adults range from 30 to 47 inches in length, from tip of nose to tip of tail. More than 50 percent of that length is their tail. They weigh only 7 to 8 pounds but look substantially bigger because of their thick coats.

Like other canids, foxes have a wide variety of vocalizations. Fox vocalizations range from mews & coos, to growls & snarls, to barks & screams. Foxes do not howl.

Gray foxes are at home in open desert-scrub, chaparral, oak or pinion-juniper woodlands, and ponderosa pine or Douglas fir, so they can be found throughout much of the U.S., including most of Arizona, and southward into South America. Because they adapt well to urban and city life, they can be found in most metropolitan areas as well.

Although gray foxes do have home ranges, they are not territorial. Home ranges often overlap with those of other foxes and are marked with the scent glands located under their tails and on the pads of their feet. Urine and feces are also used to mark home ranges. The size of a gray fox's home range depends upon both the density of the fox population and the availability of resources in an area.

Den sites may include rock piles, mine shafts, crevices in cliffs, and hollows in trees. Underground dens, often dug by previous occupants such as badgers, are favored. Dens offer important protection for both adults and pups from predators such as coyotes, lions, eagles, and other large raptors.

Unlike many other canids, gray foxes do not live in social groups. A family group consists of a male and a

female and, sometimes, their pups. Breeding season will begin in late January in more temperate regions and extend through March in colder climates. Gestation is about 59 days and there may be 2-7 pups in a litter. Pups are born black, with their eyes closed, and completely helpless.

Both parents will help to care for the pups. Usually, the female stays in the den and the male brings her food. They are weaned at about 6 weeks of age. By the time they are 3 months old, they are hunting with their parents. They are often hunting independently at 4 months of age.

Pups reach full adult size at 6 months, at which time juveniles may disperse. It is not uncommon, however, for the family group to spend the entire winter together. The following spring, when they are one year old and capable of reproduction, they will disperse to make their own families.

Gray foxes are omnivorous, opportunistic hunters whose diet is quite varied. They will eat insects, lizards & snakes, mice, rats, & other small rodents, birds, and cottontails. They also eat a lot of fruit when it's in season. Because much of their prey is crepuscular (active at dawn & dusk) or nocturnal (active at night) those are the times when gray foxes are most active.

That doesn't mean you won't ever see a gray fox during daylight hours. For example, you might see one sunning himself on a wall on a cold day. However, they usually spend their days curled up in their dens, under dense brush, or in trees. Trees? Yes! Gray foxes have semi-retractable claws which allow them to climb like a cat. That's what makes gray foxes unique from all other canids: they can climb trees!