

COLUMNISTS

Meet Abilene secretive neighbor, the gray fox

Destry Greenway Special to the Reporter-News

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If you are a resident of Abilene, you may have recently spotted an animal that doesn't quite look like a dog, doesn't look like a coyote, and is much too big to be any type of cat. If so, you probably have seen your first fox.

My first sighting of a fox took place many years ago at Big Bend National Park. Sitting around the picnic table with friends late at night and only a camp lantern for light, a red fox appeared out of the brush only a few feet from me. It neither advanced nor fled, but simply wandered back and forth, seemingly unsure of what to do. After a few moments, it disappeared back into the darkness.

It was my only sighting of any type of fox — until moving to Abilene.

Many Abilene residents, myself included, have reported sightings of foxes in recent years. Like coyotes, they seem to adapt to urban life with little difficulty, are skillful at evading humans, and take advantage of abundant food sources.

Red foxes are larger, have reddish fur, and black “stockings” on their legs. Swift foxes have noticeably large ears and are much smaller than gray foxes at around five to seven pounds, or about the size of the average house cat.

Although red foxes and swift foxes could conceivably be seen in the Big Country area, the gray fox is by far the most likely to be encountered. It can be distinguished by its gray coloring, black stripe down its tail, and oval (instead of slit-like) pupils. As with all foxes, gray fox females are slightly smaller than males, with the average weight being between 8 and 16 pounds (occasionally up to 20 pounds). Surprisingly, gray foxes can climb trees!

It is believed that gray foxes mate for life, with the male assuming some responsibility in rearing the young kits. They are born blind in late spring, usually in a litter of 3-7 after a 50 plus day gestation period. The dark brown kits stay with the mother for about four to six

months, before venturing out to claim their territory. At only one year old, gray foxes are prepared to mate.

Although foxes prey on small mammals, they must be on the lookout for larger carnivores. Bobcats, coyotes, and large birds of prey can easily make a meal of the smaller fox.

Foxes are classified like other canids as carnivores or meat-eaters. However, gray foxes are omnivores, they eat pretty much anything edible. This includes rabbits, rodents, birds, insects, fruits, and vegetable matter. Since foxes are willing to eat almost anything, an urban environment like Abilene offers many possibilities.

I have seen gray foxes in Abilene in broad daylight along Cedar Creek Waterway, T & P Lane near the railroad tracks, and in my front yard near Abilene Christian University. It didn't seem the least bit perturbed as it spotted me inside, tapping on my bedroom window only a few feet away. The fox nonchalantly strolled away in the opposite direction.

There are some precautions to consider if you're lucky enough to spot a gray fox. They have been known to carry rabies. Be wary of unusual behavior, such as aggression towards humans or large animals that foxes normally avoid. In addition, although humans are usually not in danger of being attacked, pets such as small dogs and cats could be vulnerable if left outside.

Haven't yet seen a fox in Abilene? Give it time. It's not a matter of "if," it's "when."

Destry Greenway is a member of the Big Country Master Naturalist program in Abilene. All master naturalists are volunteers interested in the great Texas outdoors. From our backyards to natural spaces across the state, master naturalists are learning, sharing, and protecting our natural resources. The Big Country Master Naturalist Chapter just celebrated the graduation of the 2021 class! Keep an eye out for announcements for our fall 2022 class. To learn more about the Texas Master Naturalist program and how you can get involved go to txmn.tamu.edu or our local Facebook page @BCTXMN.