



Cooperative Extension Service  
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

## Gray Fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*)<sup>1</sup>

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### Description

The gray fox is a handsome, distinctive member of the dog family, Canidae. Although common in Florida, the gray fox often is inconspicuous due to its secretive habits. It is the only fox that regularly climbs trees to evade predators and to hunt its own prey, giving it the nickname "tree fox."

The upper side of its body is a salt-and-pepper gray; its nose and sides of its muzzle are black. A black line extends from the corner of its eyes to its neck. The sides of its neck, back and legs, the underside of its tail and the base of its ears are a bright reddish-orange. This coloration sometimes causes the gray fox to be mistaken for the red fox, but it lacks the black feet and white tail tip of that animal. Tracks also show proportionally larger toe pads and smaller overall foot size than those of the red fox.

A black stripe runs along the midline of the gray fox's bushy tail, which measures 11 to 16in (28 to 41cm). It stands 15in (38 cm) at the shoulder, has a body length of 21 to 30in (53 to 76 cm) and weighs 7 to 13lb (3.2 to 6kg).

### Habitat and Food

The gray fox ranges from Canada to Panama and is found in almost all types of habitats except closed-canopy tropical forests. In Florida, it occurs statewide except for the Keys. Preferred habitat is dense cover in thickets, forests or swamps.

Its diet consists of small mammals, insects, fruits, acorns, birds, and eggs. Due to its climbing expertise, arboreal creatures such as squirrels are more important to the gray fox's diet than to those of other wild canids.

The gray fox climbs in a scrambling motion, grasping the tree trunk with its forepaws and forcing itself higher with the long claws on its hind feet. Besides being able to leap from branch to branch in pursuit of prey, the gray fox also uses its perch to ambush victims from above. On the ground it can reach speeds of up to 28mph (17 km/hr) for short distances.

This solitary animal is most active after sundown, returning to its den during the day. These sites are located in hollow logs, ground burrows, beneath boulders, and even under buildings in some secluded areas or where the foxes have become acclimated to people. Dens frequently are lined with shredded bark or leaves.

### Reproduction

Most female gray foxes mate in their first year. Breeding season ranges from late January to March and may be heralded by fierce battles among males. Gestation takes 50 to 55 days, after which females produce 3 to 7 dark-brown, blind pups.

The male stays with his mate and helps care for the young. The pups are weaned at or about 6 weeks. Gradually the pups learn to fend for themselves, first leaving the den area to hunt with their parents when they are about 3 months old.

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### Damage and Control

The gray fox is an excellent mouser. While it rarely invades poultry yards, it has been known to prey on small farm animals and birds. Other problems include an occasional outbreak of canine distemper and--more rarely--an outbreak of rabies. The gray fox also may dig holes in yards.

Solutions include the use of sentry dogs and bright flashing lights or a continuous bright light after dark, when pets and small farm animals should be confined. Other exclusionary methods include the removal of brush from around the ranch or farmstead.

Foxes often become nuisances when they are fed by people. In these cases, feeding programs should be stopped and any other food sources eliminated.

In Florida, the gray fox is a protected species and cannot be trapped or destroyed without a permit from the state Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC). Its coarse, thin coat does not have much commercial value.

### Population Trends and Conservation Issues

The gray fox has adapted well to urban environments. It can be found in almost any developed area that affords some degree of vegetation cover. However, urban foxes have a higher incidence of canine distemper than those in the wild due to their proximity to stray dogs. This is one reason urban foxes should not be relocated.

A similar species, the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), is established in Florida west of the Apalachicola River and sporadically southward. Observations in peninsular Florida are probably the result of recent releases.

### Suggested Reading

- Bueler, Lois E. 1973. *Wild Dogs of the World*. Stein & Day, NY.
- Trapp, Gene R. and Donald L. Hallberg. 1975. Ecology of the Gray Fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*): A Review. Pp. 164-178. In: M.W. Fox, (ed.), *The Wild Canids: Their Systematics, Behavioral Ecology and Evolution*. Van Nostrand Reinhold Co. NY.