

Conservation Corner

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The Hen roosted high on her perch;
Hungry Fox down below, on the search,
Coaxed her hard to descend
She replied, "Most dear friend!
I feel more secure on my perch."

The trickster fox, popular in cultures and folklore around the world, may be found on every continent save Antarctica. Of the 12 species of true foxes, the red fox is by far the most common with 47 subspecies. Iowa is home to two fox species, the red fox and gray fox. And while the hen was wise to follow the moral of the story, "Beware of interested friendships," her caution may not have saved her had the predator in Aesop's Fable been a gray fox. Did you know gray foxes are the only canines who can climb trees?



The gray fox, *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*, is one of the oldest fox genera with fossil records dating back 3.6 million years. Today they may be found in rocky, wooded, and brushy regions from southern Canada to northern South America. The genus name is from the Greek word for "tailed dog" while its species name means ashensilver. The gray fox has pointed ears, a pointed muzzle, and rusty red sides and underbelly. The majority of its pelt, however, is salt and pepper gray highlighted with a black streak down the ridge of its tail.

Gray fox are smaller as well as more agile and wiry than the red fox with adults weighing in at only 10-12 pounds. Mating occurs during early winter months with litters of 3-5 pups born during April and May. The pups are weaned at three months, independent at four months, and the family disbands at summer's end.

Gray fox are nocturnal, secretive, and solitary hunters. More omnivorous than red foxes and coyotes, frequent prey include rabbits, mice, and moles but also birds as well as plants such as corn, apples, nuts, berries, and grass. In the summer and fall, grasshoppers and crickets form a large part of their diet.

Though not yet endangered or threatened in Iowa, gray fox numbers have been dropping steadily over the past 40 years. Red fox populations have also declined, but not as sharply as the gray fox. While the cause hasn't yet been identified, the old favorites are suspected – disease, competition (with rising raccoon populations), and habitat loss. The hunting season, which runs from Nov. 1 to Jan. 31., is not considered a major threat due to low demand for gray fox pelts.

So how does a gray fox climb a tree? They have longer and more hooked claws than the red fox, all the better to grip the tree bark with. Still, it is rather comical to watch as the fox hugs the tree, grips the bark with its claws, then pushes against the tree with its hind legs in a series of upward scoots until the fox dismounts the trunk to stand on a branch.

Have you seen a gray fox go tree climbing in Pocahontas County?