

A Fox in My Yard – January

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum

“Wildness reminds us what it means to be human, what we are connected to rather than what we are separate from.” Terry Tempest Williams

For many of us, the sight of a fox in urban areas is a welcome one, an assurance of nearby wilderness, adaptability and beauty. If you’re raising chickens, maybe not so much, but in some inexplicable way most of us take comfort in having not entirely tamed (conquered, ruined) the natural environment that surrounds us.

Opossums, squirrels and rabbits rarely elicit the same response. Their commonness, appearance or potential landscape damage tends to give them a much lower ranking on the “welcome to my yard” scale.

So why are foxes so prevalent in our neighborhoods? As “unfussy omnivores” they will eat almost anything—mice, birds, voles, insects, berries—as well as pet food or any foods we ourselves would eat or discard. In summer, red foxes eat apples, grasses, corn and berries, while in winter they rely more on mice, squirrels and rabbits. So our yards are an easily accessible smorgasbord with almost no predators to harm them (while coyotes may prey on them, they are far less likely to venture into urban areas like foxes).

Foxes are solitary rather than pack animals. They live in families while raising their young, otherwise they sleep and hunt on their own, making their presence in urban areas far less threatening. More to know:

- Their home range tends to be 1-5 square miles but can be much larger, depending on the abundance of foods.
- They prefer suburban areas with plants and gardens to more industrialized inner city areas.
- They depend on highly developed senses of smell and hearing to locate prey (they can hear a mouse squeak from 100 feet away). Though they quickly perceive moving objects, they may not notice still objects.
- Offspring are born just once a year in March or April, and the average litter has five “kits.”
- Pets like chickens, rabbits and guinea pigs are likely targets but they’re unlikely to confront cats.
- The only time they might endanger to humans is if they are rabid, signs of which can include partial paralysis, staggering and extremes of either aggressiveness or unnatural tameness.
- Their average weight is 8-14 pounds, similar to a medium-sized dog.
- They can run 30 mph or more.
- They can usually be distinguished from other relatives in the *Canidae* family—jackals, wolves, dogs—due to their slim frame, long thin legs, bushy tail and pointed nose.

As one writer put it, “Nature in the city is nature at her most tenacious,” maybe that’s why we take such pleasure in seeing foxes and other wild and native plants and animals in our neighborhoods.

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