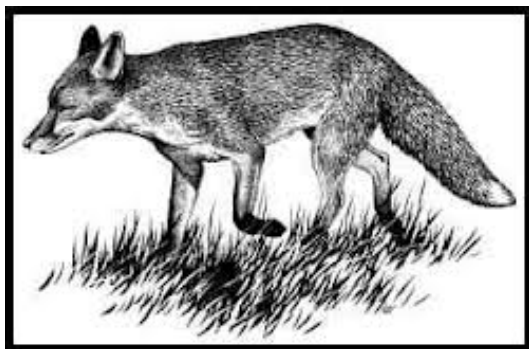


## **Creature Feature: Summer 2013**

By W. Scott Douglas

# **Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes* and Gray Fox, *Urocyon cinereoargenteus***



I think it's our long, close relationship with the wolf that makes us smile whenever we are privileged to see a family of fox romping in a pasture or a large red male streaking across the back yard. Fox are in the same family as wolves or dogs, but they certainly are very different in their behavior and position in the ecosystem. Recently we had a discussion about the natural place of the fox in the Watershed, and whether or not the red fox is an invasive species. Opinions differed, so I decided to do some research and set the record straight.

Both species of fox, gray and red, are native to North America. The population of red fox was sparse in the eastern US at the time of colonization; most of our area was populated by the gray fox instead. As the land was cleared for logging and agriculture, and the human population rose, the shy forest-dwelling gray fox was supplanted by the more open dwelling, human tolerant, red fox. It is true that the Europeans did bring red fox with them to breed for hunting, and these animals did form the base of the current population, but the explosion in red fox is more the result of habitat alteration than invasive exclusion. In fact, in areas where habitat is diverse enough to allow both animals to co-exist, the gray fox is dominant over the red.

So which species do we have here in the Watershed? There is some understandable confusion about which species people have seen. Some claim to have seen both gray and red fox. It is likely that there are gray fox in the watershed, given the amount of forested land we have, but



the red is certainly more common. The red fox is most active at dawn and dusk, while the gray fox is mostly nocturnal; however, it is possible to see either of them during the day. Gray fox are the only canid (dog-like mammal) that can climb trees – so if your animal is in a tree, the identification is pretty simple. Since the gray fox has a lot of red in its coat and the red fox can be red, gray, black, white or a combination of any of these colors, you can't just base your identification on color alone. The definitive identification in the field is actually pretty straight-forward. Red fox always have a white tail tip and usually have black “socks” on all four feet; grey fox have a black tail tip and no “socks”. All foxes are the size of a small dog, only up to 15 lbs, or so and their tail is almost as long as the body. The gray fox is generally slightly larger than the red. If the animal you see is uniform gray, with the tail more like half the length of the body and weighing closer to 50 lbs, then it's probably a coyote.

Both species of fox are opportunistic feeders, eating insects, fruit, small mammals, birds and carrion. They will take domestic fowl, and they will get into your garbage if its not properly stowed. More than likely though, a pesty fox is a red rather than a gray. Red fox live in burrows, usually abandoned woodchuck holes, while gray fox like to live under fallen trees or stumps, or in small caves or under jumbled rock piles. Red fox sleep outside, wrapped in their luxurious tail, while gray fox like to sleep in their dens. Breeding occurs in the winter; kits are born in the spring, blind and helpless. The kits grow quickly, and are weaned at 8-10 weeks. The parents stay with the pups until late fall, when they disperse. It is legal to trap both species in Pennsylvania.