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The Fox Next Door

Red foxes could be moving into your neighborhood.

By Karen De Seve

The sun starts to set in northern Virginia, and a red fox wakes up and stretches, ready to search for dinner. She hunts alone and steps silently through the bushes. In the shadows she is almost invisible. Then she stops; her keen ears hear something rustling in the leaves a few feet ahead. She sniffs the air--a rabbit, her favorite. From a crouched pose, the red fox springs toward the target, quickly killing it with her sharp teeth. She then buries her catch, saving it for leaner times or when she has babies to feed.

The red fox sniffs around again. This time she smells something different. Following the scent, she squeezes through a narrow gap in a wooden fence. Now she is hungry. The red fox suddenly leaps up, over the edge of...an open garbage can. She tears through a plastic bag and snatches some scraps of grilled chicken. As the fox climbs out, the garbage can tips over with a crash. A dog barks. Backyard lights turn on, but the sly fox has already disappeared through the fence with her meal in her mouth.

Urban Wildlife

This dinnertime scenario is becoming more and more common across the United States. Cities and suburbs are spreading into the countryside, swallowing up red fox habitat. But instead of moving, these clever wild animals learn to thrive near people.



"Red foxes are urban wildlife," says Vicky Monroe, a wildlife biologist in Fairfax County, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C. "They change their behavior to suit human activity. They can be scavengers or predators, whatever they need to get food and find den sites." To avoid people, skillful red foxes hunt at night in backyards, gardens, and city parks. Luckily, they are not picky eaters. Although rabbits as well as mice and other rodents are their favorite fare, red foxes will eat birds, frogs, snakes, grasshoppers, and even berries. A hungry red fox will also jump into an open Dumpster or garbage can for tasty leftovers or nibble on pet food that is left out on the porch.

Moving In

As winter begins near Denver, Colorado, two red foxes pair up to mate and raise a family. They look for a place to dig a den. Instinct tells them to find a spot on the edge of a forest near a field. The hunting would be good there. But there are no forests or fields--only buildings and bushes. Needing a place to nestle, the foxes sneak under a porch. This is a prime real estate, hidden from people, with plenty of rodents nearby.

The fox pair secretly lives there until their six pups, or kits, start to explore the world. There's nothing secret about fox pups! Born in March, the three-month-olds romp and tackle each other, learning hunting skills while they play. As they grow bolder, they wander farther from home. By October, the red fox family will leave the safety of the porch, each in search of its own den site.

Cleverness--a trademark of red foxes--helps them find some creative accommodations. They have been known to squeeze through gates, scale high fences, and break into sheds and garages. One scientist says he knew of a red fox that found its way into a college football stadium and slept on the field during the off-season.

Street Savvy

In a central Illinois woodland, a red fox is prowling for new territory. He searches for a home range where he will hunt, find a mate, and father pups. Other foxes have marked their ranges already, so this male ventures farther away where there will be less competition for food. The red fox wanders out of the woods. Up ahead is a suburban park. His search is over; here he will live closer to other foxes than he would in the countryside, but there is plenty of food and no predators in sight.

But that doesn't mean this fox is out of danger. His ears pick up a sound he recognizes. He freezes at the park's edge. He sits and waits. A car zooms past. Satisfied that the threat is gone, the fox gets up and trots across the road, slinking into the bushes on the other side.

Why did the fox cross the road? Because people put it there.

Keep Them Wild

They may live in backyards, but red foxes are wild animals. To help keep them wild, people must never feed foxes and should always maintain a distance from them. Wildlife biologist Vicky Monroe advises covering garbage cans and bringing pets and pet food in at night. "Red foxes can lose their wild ways if humans feed them," she says. "They'll lose their ability to hunt, for example." If they can't hunt, they can't survive.

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- Red foxes are the most widespread meat-eating mammals in the world. Their natural range covers much of the northern hemisphere.
- Foxes sometimes leap straight up into the air to pounce down on a mouse scurrying through the grass.
- Both parents take care of their young, hunting for food and bringing it back to hungry pups waiting at the den.
- They are small and seem catlike, but red foxes are relatives of dogs, wolves, and coyotes.

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