



MAKE HABITAT A HABIT

CANINE WITH FELINE TENDENCIES

By Barbara Caswell



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Just as the world can be divided into those who must sleep with the window open or those who can't shut an eye until it's closed, animals can be divided into those who thrive alongside humans and those who fade from the scene once people move in.

Shy, sensitive animals such as jackrabbits and the gray fox tend to diminish or disappear entirely when human encroachment occurs. Tougher guys such as raccoons and opossums adapt quickly to garbage handouts and survive, although not very luxuriously, even in dense city populations.

Where we live, in a country setting at the edge of the city limit, gray foxes used to be spotted regularly around the perimeter of abandoned Christmas tree farms which had grown into small forests.

The dense, overgrown Monterey pines that used to be here made a shadowy, private home for all kinds of wildlife . . . we once spotted a bobcat and later a coyote, even so close to town. When the ailing pines, stricken with bark beetles, were removed for development, the gray foxes vanished.

This interesting little mammal is a member of the family *Canidae*, but plays the odd role of a catlike dog. Most canines are rowdy, chasing hunters, but foxes have a

If you are lucky enough to have foxes in your area, you needn't think of them as threatening, as long as you keep a secure nighttime coop for poultry and don't touch or feed them.

dainty technique for catching rodents, which they quietly stalk and spring upon, landing with their tiny front feet pinning luckless prey to the ground. A baby fox practices with pretend victims, just as a kitten plays with a catnip mouse. Many people dislike this quality in cats of "playing with their food," because they perceive



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"Foxy Lady" lost her mate to a car and was found standing over his body at the spot where the pair used to cross to a creek for their nightly hunt. Foxes are devoted mates, and observers assumed she was ill, as she lingered near him. Her physical injuries were found to be slight, and she was soon released from a wildlife rescue center.

cats as being unnecessarily cruel as they torture their mouse meals.

I regard all animal behavior theories with some suspicion, since they seem to go out of fashion as frequently as theories on butter and margarine. I have lately read that cats don't play with their catch for fun, but that they are actually compelled by instinct to do so. In other words, they're not sadistic; they're just working out at the kitty gym to keep up their skills. Whether good or bad, foxes share this quality with cats.

The simple fact is that there is very little money set aside for scientific research of animals, since the human world is always in need of repair.

Foxes also have those weird slit pupils associated with cats, with a reflective membrane that gives extra light sensitivity for night vision. This also makes those eyes shine back at you in your headlights. Warner Shedd, in his book *Owls Aren't Wise and Bats Aren't Blind*, states that foxes have long, catlike whiskers and also arch their backs with their hair standing up when threatening another fox, as cats do in a fight.

In fact, although panicky homeowners often question wildlife rescuers about the safety of their pets, the little Western Gray Fox we have around here is just a shrimp underneath that bushy coat, weighing only 7-13 lbs., and his favorite food is small rodents. He's also a fruit lover and grasshopper catcher, and only a small percentage of his diet is made up of eggs, birds and things like crayfish and centipedes. Our gray fox is also the only tree-climbing canine, and he likes to keep some little caches of food, sort of a "Now and Later" of dead voles and some berries. A gray fox may have a rusty coat during some seasons, but he never gets the white tail tip admired in his red cousin.

Foxes are wonderful mousers, but to survive, they need the same things all mammals need: water, a food source and essential cover to shelter their babies.

Driving home one night, I noticed two cats frisking playfully with each other by the road. They hopped, feinted, and pounced, focused only on each other in that idiotic way of kittens, so I slowed to a crawl, realizing that they weren't paying attention. As I drove by, I realized that only one was a cat, but the second animal was a Western Gray Fox. Both seemed perfectly at ease with each other, and appeared to enjoy their time together.

English settlers long ago imported the red fox to the United States for hunting purposes, and there is always quite a fuss about the non-native status of the red fox and its predatory habits with native birds.

State wildlife rescues will not accept a red fox because of its status with California Fish and Game. However, red fox fossils predating Columbus's arrival have been found, so there is some kind of native red fox here. House cats aren't exactly native to this country, doing tremendous damage to bird populations, and they haven't been outlawed. Good grief! The idea that wildlife can be managed by "pitiful two-leggeds," (as some Indian tribes call humanity), is an ambitious one, in my opinion. Our knowledge of wildlife is very limited, and our wisdom even more so.

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