

# Gray Fox

BY TERRY B. JOHNSON • ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

**SCIENTIFIC NAME:** *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*. Genus derived from the Greek *uro*, for tail, and *kyon*, meaning dog. Specific epithet formed from the Greek words for ash-colored (*cinereus*) and silver (*argenteus*).

**DESCRIPTION:** Adult gray foxes are even smaller than coyotes. They stand about 14-15 inches tall at the shoulder, and measure about 32-44 inches from nose to base of the 16- to 18-inch tail. They weigh just 6-10 pounds in the Southwest. Females are slightly smaller than males. In both sexes, the fur is coarse and mostly gray in color, with flashes of reddish along the sides of the neck, flanks, legs, and underside of tail. The belly and undersides are typically buffy. The tail is variable, but always tipped black. The face is distinctive: a rather long, narrow muzzle that is set off by relatively large, triangular ears.

**HABITAT:** Generally occupies more open habitats, from low desert at 100-foot elevation or lower well up into brushy and sparsely wooded, rocky slopes and canyons up to and above 9,000 feet in elevation. Plant communities most often occupied include desert scrub, desert grassland, chaparral, and oak and pine woodland. Urban settings with ample cover also often provide safe haven.

**DISTRIBUTION:** West Coast (scrub and mountains) of the United States through the American Southwest and throughout the states east of the Great Plains. Also occurs in southern Canada and southward into Mexico. Occurs virtually statewide in Arizona.

**BIOLOGY:** Gray fox biology is pretty well known. Adults den in hollow trees, cavities under logs and bushes,

rock crevices, and sometimes burrows—both self-excavated and appropriated from other species. Some dens are well up in trees (to 30 feet or more), reflecting this species' ability to climb trees with surprising alacrity. Gray foxes sometimes leap from tree limb to tree limb, in a manner more typically associated with tree squirrels.

Like most foxes, gray foxes are territorial. They mark their territorial boundaries with urine, feces, and with scent from glands on either side of the anus. The scent gland products are quite pungent, and the odor may seem reminiscent of skunk.

Breeding occurs from January to April. Litters average two to seven pups, born about 51 to 53 days after impregnation. The kits emerge from the den at 5 weeks of age, and stay with the parents for another 10 to 11 weeks. Then they become independent and may wander far and wide. Sexual maturity occurs at about 1 year of age.

Gray foxes forage widely (day or night), and their tastes are varied. Plant material (especially fruits and nuts in season), invertebrates, small vertebrates (mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians), and eggs are well represented in the diet. In turn, gray foxes are fed upon by, or otherwise succumb to, golden eagles, coyotes, bobcats, and any other predator of sufficient size to pose a threat.

A variety of diseases are associated with gray foxes, including rabies—outbreaks of which have recently been noted in southern Arizona, the Flagstaff area, and other parts of the state. Canine distemper can be a real problem where unvaccinated domestic dogs are allowed to run free.

**STATUS:** The gray fox is not on the Department's list of *Wildlife of Special Concern in Arizona*, nor is it being considered for federal listing. The species is considered quite common here; no population declines have been noted, other than short-term, local die-offs associated with disease outbreaks. Take by hunters and trappers is regulated by the Department; the numbers of gray foxes harvested each year seems more closely aligned with fur prices than with anything else.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** None. 🦊

*Terry B. Johnson, chief of the Department's Nongame and Endangered Wildlife Program and regular contributor to Wildlife Views, is a bit of a gray fox himself.*

