

What's in Your Backyard?

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

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In normal times, a great many of us miss what happens in and around our own backyards. With so many of us sheltering in place these days, there is an opportunity to better observe our yards and neighborhoods during those 8, 10, 12 or more hours that we would not ordinarily be home. Such an opportunity presented itself at my home over the last two months.

In early April, we first saw a female red fox under our bird feeders (photo). Other than some sections of her fur, she looked quite healthy, in fact, she looked pregnant. She continued to visit on an almost daily basis, eating spilled seed from the feeder, and occasionally stalking a bird or squirrel. She also seemed to be eating some of the fresh young grass shoots. Foxes are omnivores. Although we often think of them hunters, eating mice, voles chipmunks, etc. But they also eat plants, including acorns, grass seeds and fruits.



There is some dispute as to whether or not the red fox is native to North America. Red foxes were definitely introduced from Europe, but whether or not they were already here is not known for sure. If they were here, they were not abundant. The North American and Eurasian red foxes were once thought to be two separate species, *Vulpes fulva* and *Vulpes vulpes*, respectively. They are now considered a single species.



We continued to enjoy watching her visit both our bird feeding stations, then we missed her for a few days. When she returned, she was noticeably thinner. She had obviously had her pups. She would still visit on occasion, but we did not see her every day.

Red foxes mate in the winter, in January or February here in New Jersey, and the gestation period is 50-55 days. The female will remain in or at the den prior to and for a time after giving birth. During this time, the male brings food for the female and leaves it at the den entrance for her. He does not enter the den. The average litter size is five, but could be as many as fourteen. The pups are born blind, but open their eyes after about two weeks.

We continued to observe our fox visit the bird feeders, albeit less frequently. We even saw her stalk and catch a squirrel. This went on for some time, until we received a visit one Saturday morning. There, under then feeder, was the female, as usual. But, along with her this time, was one of the pups! Later in the day, we discovered the den, under the porch of the very old house next door that is now a museum. There were four pups. Red fox pups begin to venture away from the den at about four to five weeks of age. For the next few days, we would see Momma, sometimes with a pup, some times without. We would also see pups coming alone. They followed their mother's lead, cleaning up seed that had fallen from the feeders. We would then watch as the crossed the field, on their way back to the den. It has been such a wonderful experience, being able to see this, but not all in the household are especially happy about this. We have two



dogs, and this has been a bit of a logistical problem at times, as the dogs need to go out. A fence separates the dogs from the bird feeders, so they are not in danger, but they would certainly be scared out of their wits. Especially at night, we have had to do some flashlight surveillance before letting the dogs out.



The family unit will remain together until the fall, when the young foxes will disperse, so we look forward to seeing them for the next few months, and, at least some of them, hopefully beyond. Red foxes are solitary animals, and, except during mating and family raising, live alone. The home range of a red fox can be anywhere from about two (1280 acres) to about seven (4480 acres) square miles. They sometimes overlap slightly, and those overlap areas may be defended, so red foxes are somewhat territorial. The open space around my house is about 50 acres, so it is quite likely that by the end of the fall, we will be back to Momma fox and perhaps one of the pups overlapping its mother's range on the edge.

For a week or so, it has been a joy to watch this fox family right from our kitchen and living room windows. We have seen pups under the feeders several times a day, along with their mother at times. We often see them in the field, between our feeder and their den site, pouncing in the grass, and on each other. For the last several days, the pups have been visiting less frequently, probably finding other food sources. Momma is still nursing, however (I wish I could get a shot of that!), and is visiting just as frequently as before.



The last two months of so have certainly not been normal, and we all would like to get back to the way things were. But this has also given many of us an opportunity to become more familiar with our yards and our neighborhoods, because we have been spending more time at home than ever before. In this time of uncertainty, it has been a comfort to me to know that nature goes on, and has been a great diversion to further observe nature in my own backyard. It is my hope that everyone in our Trailside family has been able to take solace in nature, and more closely examine the nature that is immediately around you.



