

Wild canines of California



Gray foxes are the most common canid in California. Note the overall gray color, reddish sides and legs, and black-tipped tail. Photo by John R. Burkett.



Coyotes live throughout California, from the lowlands to mountain conifer zones. Their larger size and darker brown coloration separate them from the smaller foxes. Photo © B. "Moose" Peterson.

California has a diverse assemblage of foxes which can be distinguished by their color and the geographical area and habitat where they live. **Coyotes** can confuse the issue somewhat since they are found throughout the state. But they are larger and more uniform in color than any of the foxes. Coyotes weigh about 25 pounds and are mostly brown, but sometimes grayish or rusty brown. There is usually some black around the shoulder and

rump area.

Red foxes have a characteristic reddish to reddish-yellow overall color. Their legs are black and the tip of the tail is usually white, though sometimes only a few white hairs — or none at all — are present.

In the field, **Sierra Nevada red foxes** are distinguished from non-native lowland red foxes only by their alpine habitat association. Red foxes are the largest of foxes, and weigh about 10-12 pounds, making them

just larger than a house cat. Their large ears can make them appear taller when seen in the field.

Red foxes occasionally exhibit different color phases. Besides the common reddish color, or red phase, they can be black, silver or "cross" in coloration. But in all these phases, they still usually exhibit the white-tipped tail. Black foxes are mostly black, with some hairs tipped with white. Silver foxes have black fur tipped with white. Cross foxes have a



San Joaquin kit fox. Kit foxes are grayish or sandy colored, like the dry habitat areas where they live. Note the large ears and the black-tipped tail. Photo © B. "Moose" Peterson.

Island foxes appear identical to the gray fox, but they are much smaller. A threatened species, these little foxes live only on the Channel Islands off southern California. Photo © B. "Moose" Peterson.



Red fox eating pheasant at DFG's Gray Lodge Wildlife Area. Red foxes usually have an overall reddish color, black legs and white-tipped tail. Other color phases include black, silver and "cross." Photo by John B. Cowan.



band of dark fur which runs down the back and across the shoulders, forming a "cross." Otherwise, they are the same reddish-yellow color.

Besides the **San Joaquin kit fox**, there are kit foxes in the southern deserts of California and in the high desert area in the northeast part of the state. Kit foxes weigh 3-6 pounds, and are extremely fast. They are light gray or sandy-colored with some rust near the sides. Legs are pale and the tail is noticeably black-tipped. The very large ears of this

fox, its dry, sparse habitat and black-tipped tail readily distinguish it from both red and gray foxes.

Gray foxes are the most common fox. They live throughout the state, except for the northeastern high desert area. They favor brush-covered areas and oak woodlands and are known for their ability to scamper up trees. In fact, it is just this trait which made them of little value for fox hunting. The chase ended all too soon. Gray foxes also live in timberland at high elevations, but rarely above

7,000 feet — where one would most likely expect to see a Sierra red fox.

Gray foxes weigh about nine pounds. They are dark gray, with rusty sides and legs. The tail is black on top, and this extends to the tip, which is black.

A miniature version of the gray fox lives only on the Channel Islands off southern California. This **island fox** is also listed as threatened. This tame little fox weighs about five pounds.

— **Esther E. Burkett**