

Red foxes moving to downtown Detroit

By COREY WILLIAMS (AP) – Jul 18, 2009

DETROIT — Keen-eyed anglers or people heading to work near Detroit's riverfront typically spot them, padding quietly in the pre-dawn light through weed-filled lots or in the shadows of long-abandoned factories.

The red fox is carving out a place of its own deep into downtown, joining the ranks of raccoons, skunks, opossum, white-tailed deer and red-tailed hawks finding homes in untended lots, houses and buildings in the rusting one-time car capital.

"I usually see them in the morning" while fishing along the city's riverfront, 65-year-old retiree Robert Smith said of the elusive fox.

They come out at other times of the day as well. Evening was approaching when a fox surprised Stephen Weisberg by popping out from behind bushes outside the Wayne County Building this spring.

"I found it amazing there was a fox romping around downtown Detroit. It was cool to see," said Weisberg, 26, of Birmingham, Mich., who was in the city with his girlfriend for dinner.

Found across all parts of the state, red foxes typically stick close to more rural areas. But Detroit's dwindling population has meant less noise and more places for foxes to hunt rats, mice, voles, pheasants, cotton tail rabbits and even pigeons.

Many neighborhoods have so few remaining houses that adjoining lots resemble small prairies and woodlands, and Detroit's extensive freeway system and old railroad connections linking the inner city to less populated areas are now serving as routes for wildlife.

"As we move out, wildlife moves in," said Matthew Walter, a fox researcher at Antioch University's New England campus in New Hampshire. "Nature heals the cuts that we've made. As long as they can survive there, and as long as they can raise young and if the hunting is good, they will stay there indefinitely."

Just over 900,000 people live within Detroit's 139 square miles, compared with more than 1.8 million who called the city home in 1950. More are expected to flee for opportunity and jobs elsewhere as the Motor City struggles through an economic crisis that has seen the unemployment rate rise to about 23 percent.

Red foxes can weigh anywhere from six to about 24 pounds and are smaller than many cats. They are typically searching for food or returning to dens when they are spotted downtown, according to Tim Payne, southeast Michigan wildlife coordinator for the state Department of Natural Resources, and they try to avoid humans.

"They will eat carrion, insects, trash," Detroit Animal Control manager Harry Ward said. "You will see them in fields catching crickets."

Experts say they don't pose a threat to humans or even pets, given their small size. Foxes can carry rabies, but the state says just seven positive cases in the animals were reported between 2004 and 2008.

"We want you to keep the animal wild," Payne said. "Those animals are way more afraid of you."

But not all wild animals are as shy. Coyotes — a natural predator of red foxes — can be a problem for pets.

They can reach twice the size of foxes and have killed at least one pet dog in the suburb of Bloomfield Hills, about 15 miles northwest of Detroit. Ward said three coyote sightings have been confirmed in Detroit, including one downtown.

But Ward said he's excited about what's happening to Detroit's ecosystem.

"The habitat is changing, and it's a healthier environment, and this is wildlife you can actually enjoy. This a good thing. People should just learn to live with these animals."

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In a photo provided by Palmer Park Golf Course, a red fox is seen on the course's back

nine in Detroit. Keen-eyed anglers or people heading to work near Detroit's riverfront typically spot them, padding quietly in the pre-dawn light through weed-filled lots or in the shadows of long-abandoned factories. The red fox is carving out a place of its own deep into downtown, joining the ranks of raccoons, skunks, opossum, white-tailed deer and red-tailed hawks finding homes in the rusting one-time car capitol. (AP Photo/Palmer Park Golf Course)



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