

Urban Foxes

WEST DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) – At first, they showed themselves only in fleeting glimpses, sauntering along the railroad tracks when an outdoor light was flipped on or maybe running through the yard.

Then they started coming, two, three, four, even five red foxes at a time, barking, eating and playing in Kevin and Julie Thomasson's suburban backyard.

"In the 35 years I've been hunting, I've maybe have seen one red fox in the wild," Kevin Thomasson said. "But to sit here in West Des Moines and see five running out in the yard, it's unusual."

Actually, wildlife biologists say, such sights aren't all that rare. Foxes, just like raccoons, opossums and deer, have adapted to urban living.

In fact, cities in some regard might even be friendlier than the country for foxes, whose habitat and food supply have shrunk because of large-scale farming and the influx of coyotes, who compete for the same food and occasionally prey on foxes.

"It's not rare at all anymore, especially with all the coyotes," said Richard Bishop, chief of the wildlife bureau for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. "We have coyotes all around Des Moines and there's plenty of food in the city. There's a lot more rabbits in town now than out in the country."

Rabbits are a key element in a fox's diet. A fox also will eat mice, voles, pocket gophers and birds, along with grass, nuts and fruit – all of which are available in town.

"They're opportunist feeders," said Ryan Powers, a wildlife specialist for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "They'll also eat dead meat, carrion. And a lot of times, they'll establish food caches. They'll actually bury food and come back to it later. Foxes are well known for that."

Though the Thomassons live in a crowded area where the houses sit close together, their backyard abuts a railroad track and there's a large stand of trees and brush on the other side of the tracks, an area that's ideal wildlife habitat.

When they first moved in three years ago, Thomasson said he and his family caught an occasional glimpse of a fox, usually when they'd turn on a light. Or they'd see tracks in the snow. Then, earlier this year, Julie Thomasson was cutting a nephew's hair on the deck and throwing the hair into the yard. Suddenly, she noticed a fox, which apparently had been attracted by the hair.

Later, around the first of July, Kevin Thomasson threw a couple of T-bones into the yard after dinner and two foxes came up. Since then, he has been tossing food scraps out most evenings and the foxes have kept coming, sometimes as many as five.

Now, Thomasson can whistle, throw some food in the yard and it won't be long before he sees a fox head peeking over the tracks.

Bill Ohde, a DNR wildlife biologist based in Wapello, said he wasn't surprised by Thomasson's story.

"It's just a case of there being a good food supply on the edge of towns," Ohde said. "Most cities have huge rabbit populations and you usually have small rodents in town, too. I guess they learn a good thing when they find it."

Ohde said he got a call this year from a Wapello resident who found a fox den underneath an older home in town. Another resident called after catching a fox in a live trap that was meant to capture a raccoon.

"They wanted to let the fox go," he said. "They had a big garden and always had problems with rabbits until the fox started denning up by the house. They were tickled to have the fox around there, so he let it go."

Though the DNR has no figures on fox populations in Iowa, Bishop said it's evident the numbers are down from the 1960s and '70s.

Mange knocked out the population in southern Iowa in the 1950s and then coyotes moved in. Another outbreak of mange hit in northern Iowa in the 1970s.

"At the same time, we started to see increasing cultivation," Bishop said. "We lost a lot of grass and alfalfa fields that provided pheasants and mice for red fox. Their food supply shrunk a lot. You get in some sections up there and it's corn from one end to another with no fence rows, no habitat for mice. The fox populations never rebounded after mange hit in the '70s."

So foxes move to where there was food and at the same time, cities continued to move toward them as residential areas spread into farm fields and woodlands.

"As we take what we consider our wild areas and start penetrating them with homes, each one is creating a small opening in the habitat," said the DNR's Ed Weiner, a wildlife biologist based in Onawa in western Iowa.

"Even if you go into a timber area, you're breaking up the habitat and creating little openings in areas which fox would be using," he said. "So you're bound to get them in

these areas."

Bishop said people have become more tolerant of foxes, which once were thought of as chicken thieves but now are seen as a valuable animal to have around. He also noted that pet owners don't let their dogs run around as they once did, and that creates a friendlier environment for fox.

Thomasson certainly enjoys having his around.

"I went out last spring and bought \$100 worth of plants – pansies, geraniums – put them in and the next day, they were all nibbled," he said. "The rabbits got to them. But you know, I haven't seen a rabbit around here in probably two months."