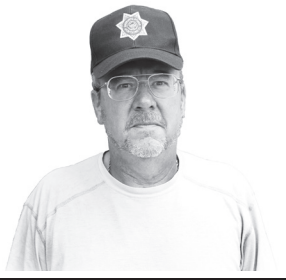


Seeing a kit fox offers the rarest of treats



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I have a hunting buddy that claims to be a birder during the off-season. Even while we are hunting, he will stop suddenly, startling the wits out of me, and point out some obscure bird in a tree. "Look! There is a yellow-bellied sap sucker, in his full fall plumage," he would bellow.

"We are hunting deer, stop looking for birds," is about all I can get out.

While I am not a birder, I really enjoy watching wildlife. We live in an area where deer, rabbits, quail, geese, coyotes, and scores of other wildlife roam freely. Sometimes they roam a bit too freely and raid the garden, but that is a story for another day.

One critter I enjoy viewing from our patio observation deck, would have to be the fox. There has been a number of red fox that live permanently in our area, and we have seen several litters of kits raised here. While a baby fox is called kit, there is a species called the kit fox.

The state of Colorado is home to all 4 species of fox that reside in North America, these include the gray fox, red fox, tiny swift fox, and the kit fox. People often ask about the silver fox, but there really is no such critter.

The silver fox is a melanistic form of the red fox, and the colors can range from black to



A rare treat to see in the wild is a Kit Fox. I have only seen a couple in my outdoor lifetime. (Courtesy photo/Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

bluish gray, and silver, with a white-tipped tail. These color phased red fox make up about 10% of the entire red fox population. I have a "silver fox" that for years thought it was a separate species.

The kit fox is a very rare beast to see in the wild indeed. I pride myself on having seen many rare animals in their native habitat, but I have only seen a kit fox once. We were hunting deer in the southwest corner of the state, and caught a brief glimpse of one.

He prefers warm weather and calls the more arid regions of the southwest his home. Most common place to find him includes Nevada, Utah, California, Arizona, Texas, New Mexico, and the southern half of Colorado.

The kit fox goes by the street name of *Vulpes macrotis*, but he answers

to just about anything.

The kit is the smallest fox in North America, maxing out at 6 pounds, even after overeating over the holidays. His body might reach 21 inches, with one-third of that his tail. That tail is very bushy and gray in color, with a black tip. His coat is a yellow gray, with each hair being several colors, giving them sort of a brindled look.

The feature that really stands out would have to be their ears. The ear is at least 4 inches long, and seems to dominate his appearance, making his head seem small to size. While those oversized ears are great for hearing, their real purpose is to dissipate heat. They also have extra-long hair around their feet to protect them from the hot sand.

Kit foxes are primarily carnivorous, hunting voles, small rodents,

birds, and rabbits. They have been known to eat vegetables, fruit, and fish when food is scarce. They are always hunting for food, even if they are not hungry. A kit fox will save its kill until later, for its next meal.

Being a true hunter, the fox has excellent senses. They can actually hear an animal underground. With the long snout, their sense of smell is incredible.

Foxes are generally nocturnal, which would explain why I hardly ever see them. During the day, the kit fox rests in its multi-entrance den to stay cool and conserve water. The cooler nights are when he prefers to go hunting.

The males are called Reynard or Tod, and the females are referred to as Vixens, and they mate during October and November. The female will give birth to a litter of

up to 7 Kits during the spring. Both the male and female take care of the kits, until they head off on their own in the late fall.

In the wild, they generally live up to 5 years, but have been known to reach 12 years old in captivity. It is rare for one to make 8 years in the wild. It is usually their teeth that give out first in old foxes. They have a few predators, including the red and grey foxes, coyotes, and bobcats. Occasionally, large birds of prey may compete with them for food.

The biggest predator for the kit fox is probably man. The reason for their declining numbers is not fully understood, but likely include climate variability, use of poisons for predator control, and competition with coyotes and red foxes.

Kit fox remain on the Endangered Species list and has been there for over 50 years. Their total population is estimated to be under 7,000. If you happen to see one, it is a very rare treat, but it is not very likely, unless you get around at night and happen to see one out hunting.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. Personal email is elkhunter77@icloud.com. For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

CPW provides update on zebra mussel veligers in the Colorado River and Government Highline Canal, and Highline Lake eradication plan

SPECIAL TO THE MDP

Colorado Parks and Wildlife concluded sampling efforts in the Colorado River and Government Highline Canal for 2024. As of Nov. 1, CPW staff collected nearly 450 water samples from the Colorado River, Government Highline Canal, James M. Robb-Colorado River and Highline Lake State Parks, as well as additional areas throughout the Grand Valley. In addition to samples collected by CPW, the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), and the Grand Valley Water Entities collected additional samples within the canal system. No additional veligers or adult zebra mussels have been found in the Colorado River or Government Highline Canal since veligers were first found through routine testing in early July.

In addition to sampling, CPW continued the increased education efforts on the Colorado River, including voluntary watercraft inspections. Since

July, CPW worked with our local government and BLM partners to post signage and conduct education outreach at multiple water access points from the De Beque Canyon to the Utah Westwater boat ramp. Since July, CPW staff made more than 4,000 face-to-face educational contacts on the Colorado River. During one multi-day operation in July, staff talked to close to 600 people regarding the importance of cleaning, draining and drying their watercraft and equipment.

In early September, CPW ANS staff partnered with the United States Geological Survey (USGS) to install an autonomous sampler on the Colorado River near the Grand Valley Water Users Canal diversion. The sampler was programmed to collect eDNA samples from the river once per day and store them for up to eight days. Technicians collect the filters that the samples were collected on and replace them with new filters once a week.

"While we have con-

cluded our sampling efforts for the year, our work is not done," said Robert Walters, Invasive Species Program Manager. "Staff will continue to look for opportunities to educate the public on simple steps to prevent the spread of zebra mussels or any invasive species in Colorado waters."

Invasive species sampling will resume in the spring of 2025 once water temperatures are suitable for veliger production. With the designation of "positive" bodies of water, the increased sampling in the Colorado River and Government Highline Canal will continue for the next five years.

On Monday, Nov. 18, Colorado Parks and Wildlife completed draining Highline Lake at Highline Lake State Park as part of the plan to eradicate zebra mussels from the lake. Small areas of water are expected to remain but are expected to evaporate with sun exposure or freeze with the colder temperatures. The lake will stay empty

throughout the winter to expose as many areas as possible on the lake bed and shoreline, eliminating any remaining veligers or adult zebra mussels. During routine inspections in early November, park staff discovered five adult mussels, all of which were dead.

Highline Lake State Park staff does anticipate Highline Lake refilling and being open to boating in the spring of 2025. In anticipation of the upcoming boating season and in order to take advantage of low lake levels, the original boat ramp located on the west side of the park received much-needed repairs, including a new concrete pad.

Recreational boaters and anglers can expect to see similar boating protocols in place for the upcoming 2025 boating season that were in place at Highline Lake State Park in 2023. These changes were put in place after the discovery of zebra mussels in September of 2022, prompting CPW

to designate Highline Lake as Colorado's first infested body of water.

What to expect for the 2025 boating season:

Boats launching at Highline Lake will continue to be subject to inspection and decontamination protocols before launching.

All boats must be clean, drained and dry prior to launching at Highline Lake or they will be decontaminated.

Upon exiting the lake, all boaters will have their boats inspected and decontaminated, and they will be issued a green seal and a blue receipt that indicates it was last used on a body of water with a known aquatic nuisance species. The zebra mussel infestation is being fought at the source, and boats will not be permitted to leave the lake until they have been decontaminated by our team.

CPW will begin restocking Highline Lake following the return of normal water levels. Initially, catchable trout will be harvestable for anglers.

Our longer-term plan is to develop a robust and diverse warm-water fishery that offers a variety of fish targeted by anglers and encourages ecological balance to enhance fish growth for memorable fishing and quality harvest.

After the discovery of zebra mussels in the Government Highline Canal and Colorado River, CPW initiated the Invasive Species Rapid Response Plan and increased sampling efforts in the Colorado River from Glenwood Springs down to the Colorado-Utah border and within the Government Highline Canal. CPW staff will continue working closely with our partners at the Bureau of Reclamation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Grand Valley Water Users Association on sampling efforts as we continue to learn more about the extent of zebra mussels in these locations and educate the public on prevention.