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FOXES ON A HOT TIN ROOF

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Key words: red fox, gray fox, climbing behavior, canid morphology.

The red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) is known to be a highly adaptable animal, using a wide range of habitats. The most widely distributed carnivore in the world, the red fox is found in North America from the Arctic Circle to northern Mexico and from Alaska to extreme eastern Canada (Lariviere and Pasitschniak-Arts 1996). Red foxes have been present historically in a variety of natural habitats, including arctic tundra, deciduous forests, rangelands, agricultural lands, and mountains. Red foxes now also occur with increasing frequency in urban settings.

On 25 June 2003, at 0950–1200 MDT, 2 red foxes, probably young-of-the-year, were observed in an urban situation in Fort Collins, Colorado, a city of approximately 125,000. The foxes' presence in an urban area was not unusual, where warehouses, agricultural outbuildings, a federal research campus, and residential housing are interspersed with open space, bike trails, a railroad right-of-way, and small grassy areas. The peculiarity of the observation was that the foxes were 9.5 m aboveground on the roof of a domestic animal outbuilding (Fig. 1). The sheet-metal building is 80 m × 20 m and open on one side. Its roof is fairly flat, having a pitch of 6 degrees. One of numerous outbuildings, barns, and sheds, this building is on the compound of the Colorado State University Veterinary Science facility and is used as a shelter and livery for horses and cows.

With the exception of the gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), which climbs trees to forage, escape, and rest, and is occasionally even seen on rooftops, canids rarely exhibit arboreal tendencies (Fritzell and Haroldson 1982). Canid morphology is thought to constrain the locomotor activities involved in climbing (Taylor 1989). Red foxes do not normally climb but

have been observed climbing narrow cliff ledges in pursuit of seabird eggs, chicks, and adults on Baccalieu Island, Newfoundland (Maccarone and Montevecchi 1981, Sklepkovych 1986). On the same island, when food was scarce during the winter, 2 different red foxes were observed in balsam firs (*Abies balsamea*) chewing on cones and climbing in mountain ash (*Sorbus americanus*) and white birch (*Betula papyrifera*), up to ~8 m aboveground (Sklepkovych 1994).

The red foxes we observed were able to gain access to the building roof because of severe damage to the building following a record-setting blizzard occurring 17–19 March 2003. The weight of 81 cm of accumulated snow collapsed many roofs in Fort Collins, including a portion of the sheet-metal building where the foxes were observed. The west quarter of the building suffered the most damage where metal girders and sheet metal collapsed. Leaning on the ground, these metal pieces provided a makeshift access ramp to the structure's roof (Fig. 2).

Foxes were observed on the roof at 0950–1030 MDT as they were pacing back and forth along the peak of the roof and on the sloped part of the roof to its outer edge. They frequently looked down over the peak of the roof into the open side of the building in an apparent attempt to determine how to gain access to Rock Doves (*Columba livia*), House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), and European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) which were perched on exposed steel beams just under the peak and were flying in and out of the building. Four to 6 Rock Doves were intermittently present on the roof 5–10 m from the foxes, but the foxes made no obvious attempt to pursue or capture them. Upon our approach, the foxes returned to the ground, apparently without difficulty.

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Fig. 1a. Red foxes on the sheet metal roof, 9.5 m aboveground.



Fig. 1b. Close-up of a rooftop fox.



Fig. 2. The collapsed west end of the building, providing an access ramp to the roof.

Kits are often full grown by late June and it is unknown whether the foxes were adults or curious juveniles; we suspect the latter, judging from their size. Climbing behavior in this normally crepuscular, nocturnal species may be more common than previously thought.

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