

Trusting nature is fox's undoing

24 July 1985

It was at dusk that they came — five of them — the most we had ever seen at one time. The kit fox (*Vulpes macrotis*) has been called the unfoxiest fox because of its trusting nature, and that may be its undoing.

This memorable evening, five of them appeared at once in our yard — a mother and father and three pups. (Some authorities refer to the young as kits.) We had seen the two adults many times before; and as they had become acquainted with us, they came almost every evening for a handout. We would throw them scraps of whatever meat we had; and they had become so tame that they would wait for us to go into the house for additional supplies when we called to them and asked them to wait.

The adults came quite close (10 or 15 feet) but the pups, who had not seen us before, were quite wary, and we had to throw chicken bones quite a distance for them.

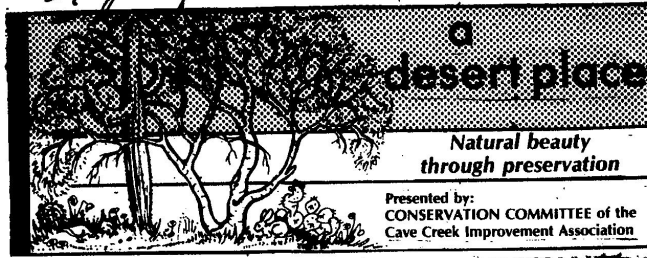
While we watched these beautiful and graceful creatures, we had another visitor. A coyote, in search of his evening meal, appeared — and like five streaks of lightning, or like an exploding Fourth of July rocket, the five foxes ran in five different directions, leaving the bewildered coyote just standing there, unable to chase all five of them and too slow in making up his mind to give chase to any of them.

Like other foxes, the kit fox is a nocturnal creature, staying in its den during the day and hunting at night. Occasionally, however, we have seen them in the late afternoon before sunset.

Their natural food is small rodents, such as mice and kangaroo rats — but they are very adaptable, and will readily accept a variety of foods that are offered them by their human friends. They are predominately carnivorous, the chicken seems to be their favorite food — but they also relish melon rinds.

Too trusting for their own good; their chief enemy is mankind, for there are some people who will even trap them for their pelts. With the pressure of increasing population, their desert habitat is continually being reduced in size, and they are now an endangered species.

They are the smallest of the North American foxes; the adults weigh only about 5 pounds. They



are members of the dog family, but their movements are almost feline, and their eyes resemble cats' eyes. Their normal life span is five to 10 years.

Like other foxes, they are neither strictly monogamous nor promiscuous, but practice a sort of serial monogamy. They live alone for almost half of each year. Then they choose mates and raise families. When the young are old enough to fend for themselves, the parents and the pups each go their own way.

The next year they may choose the same mates or other ones. We

often see couples together; and frequently, after eating the scraps we throw out to them, they will carry off as much as they can hold in their mouths, presumably for their pups.

This year, however, we have seen only a nursing mother, who comes and eats, and then takes away all she can carry for her pups. We have no idea whether she is a single parent or whether her mate, for whatever reason, just does not come with her.

The privilege of sharing the habitat with such creatures is one of the greatest enjoyments of living in the desert.