

Small Game Animals

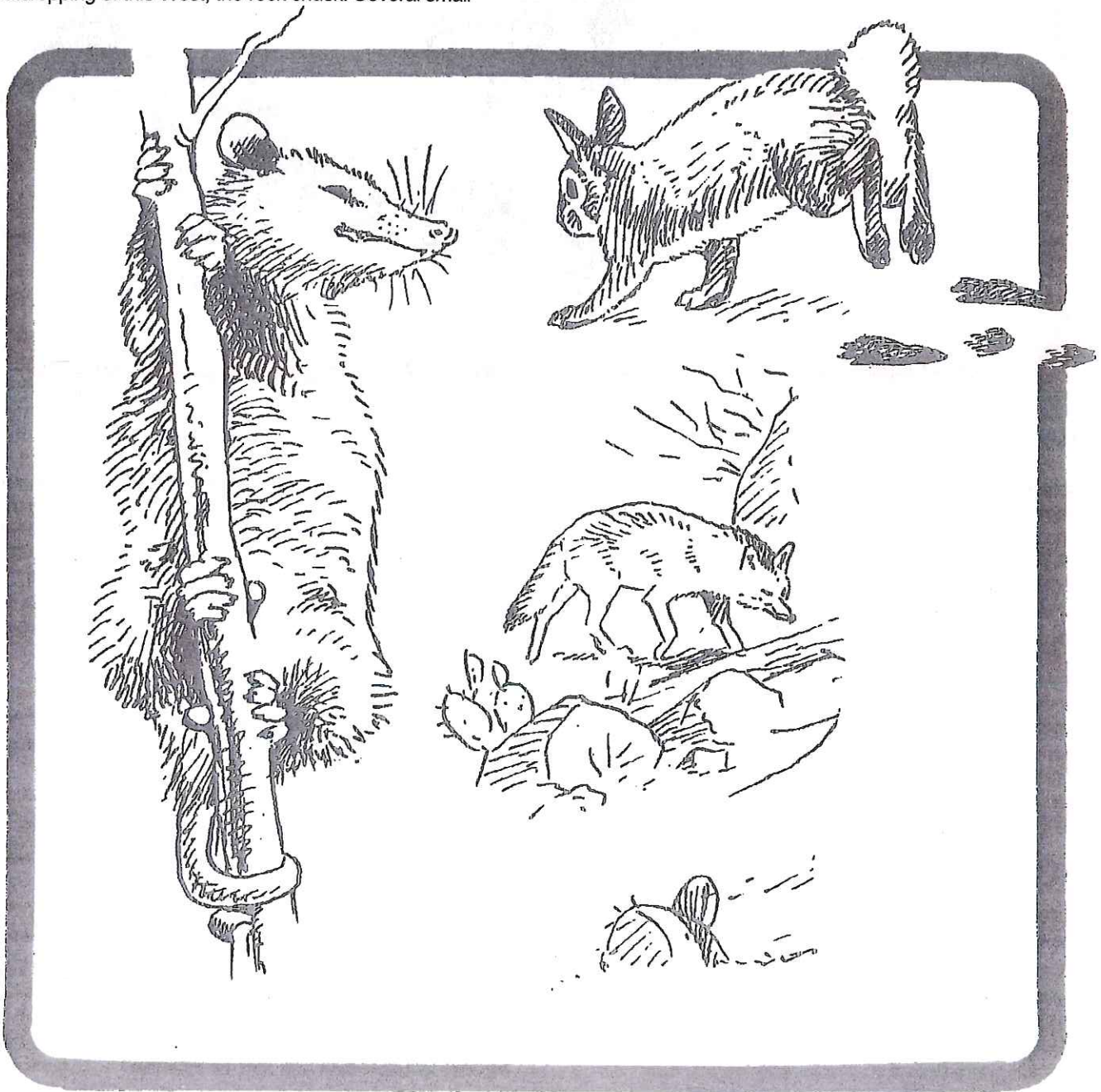
Introduction

The smaller mammals which are hunted in North America include a variety of animals, some of which are classified traditionally as small game and others which are more often referred to as "varmints," even though many of them in recent years have been assigned a game animal status. All of these small mammals are native to the United States.

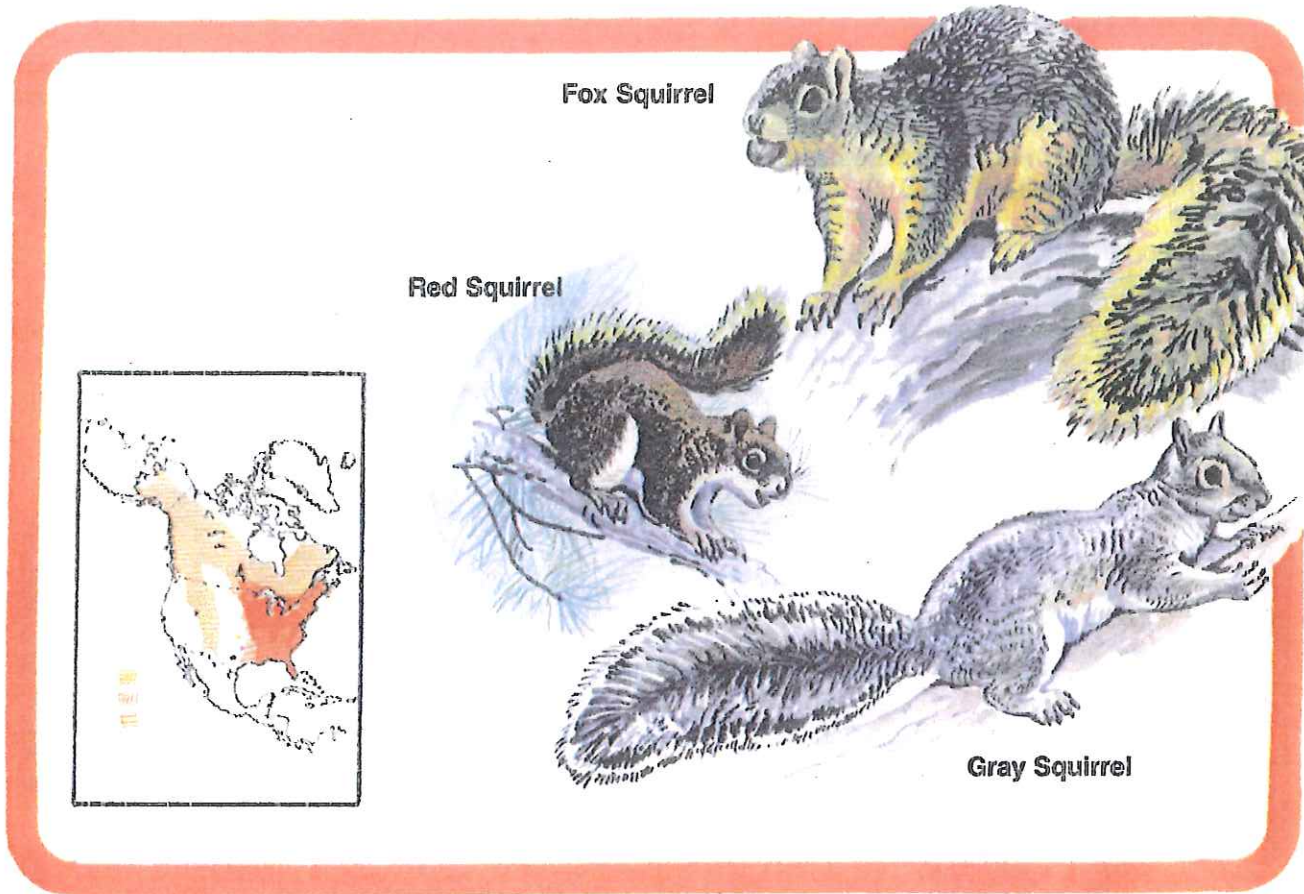
Throughout their range in the Eastern and Midwestern states, the fox squirrel, gray squirrel and cottontail rabbit are popular and much sought after game species. Also hunted over much of their home range as varmints are the woodchuck and its counterpart in the talus slopes and rocky outcropping of this West, the rock chuck. Several small

mammals which are valued for their fur are hunted as small game in some parts of the country and as varmints in other regions. Included in this group are the red and gray fox, raccoon and opossum, all of which are found throughout much of the United States today. Though more restricted in distribution, other small mammals which are hunted as game or varmints are the lynx, wolverine and bobcat.

The predators among this group of small game animals often are hunted with the aid of a predator call. By mimicking the sounds of a prey animal in distress, the calls lure the predators into the area from which the hunter is calling.



Gray, Red and Fox Squirrels



Identification

Squirrels are probably the favorite among young small game hunters and they are found throughout North America wherever forests occur. Fox squirrels are the largest, weighing from 1-3 pounds (453-1,360 g) and vary greatly in color. The grayish form with rust-colored underparts as illustrated here is the most common in the east and Midwest. In the southeast the head is often black, with white muzzle and paws. In the Deep South, black is the predominant color while the nose remains white. Gray squirrels are medium-sized, weighing from 3/4-1 1/2 pounds (340-680 g) and are uniform grayish with white underparts and white edged tails. Red squirrels are the smallest weighing from 7-8 4/5 ounces. They vary in color from rust-red with white underparts in summer, to grayish with red on back and tail in winter. The tail is edged in buff and there is a black stripe along the side in summer. Black or albino squirrels of all three species are locally common.

Habits

Fox squirrels are found in open deciduous woodlands, and spend a good deal of time foraging on the ground. When disturbed, they usually head for the tree that holds their den, a leafy structure in summer and a cavity in winter.

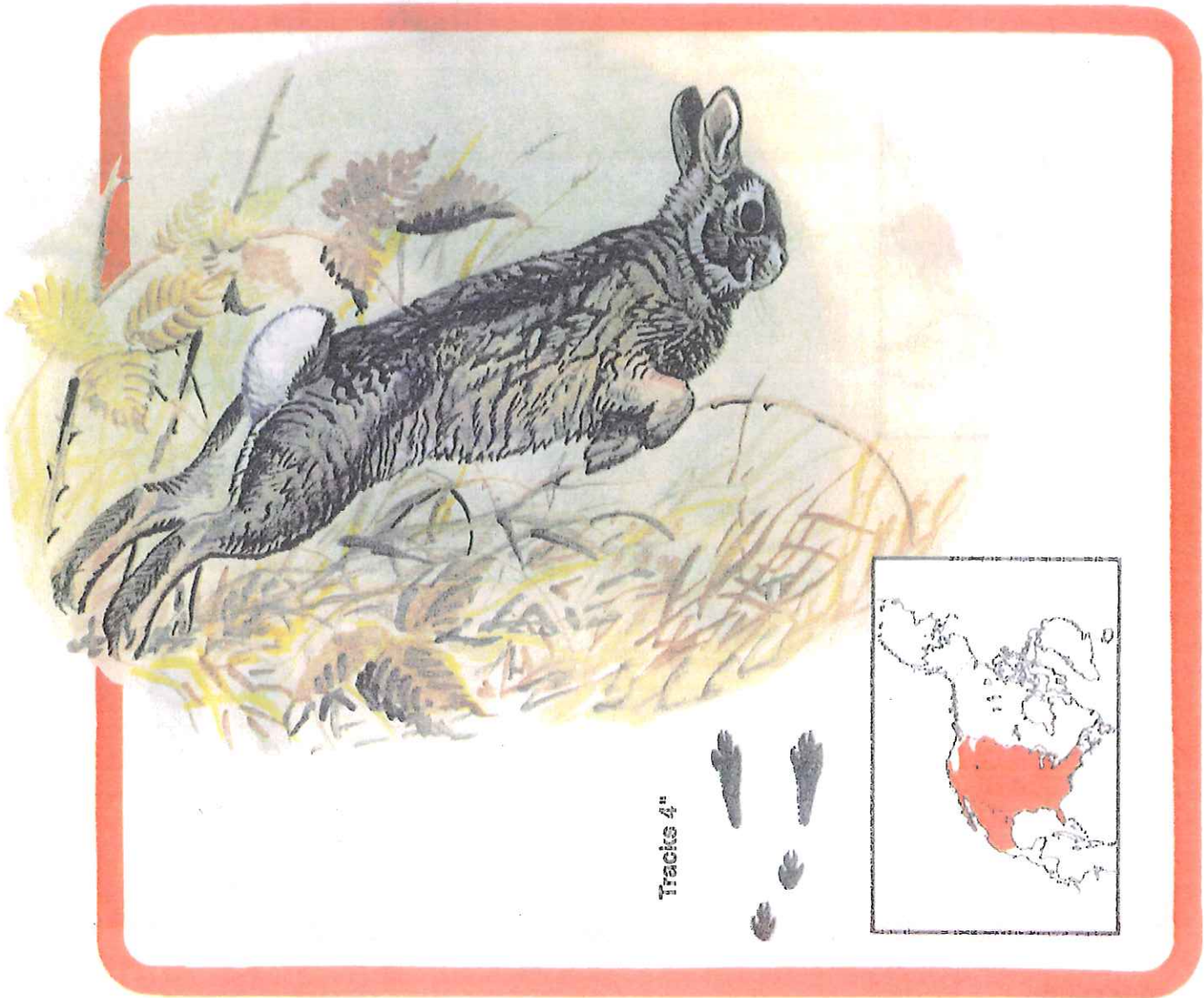
The gray squirrel, by contrast, is more adept at climbing and often escapes by running through the treetops, using its tail for balance or to help break an occasional fall. Red squirrels are small but aggressive, and frequent cone-bearing trees. Their noise often serves as a warning to other birds and animals. Both red and gray squirrels construct leaf nests in upper tree branches for summer use, and resort to leaf-lined tree cavities in winter.

Squirrels of all three species feed on a variety of plant material, including mast from oak and nut trees, seeds, fungi, and bark and buds of trees. Red squirrels may cause some damage to eggs and nesting birds.

Home range of fox squirrel is 2-3 acres, while grays may venture over 7 acres. Red squirrel's entire range is less than 200 yards.

Fox squirrels, because of their superior size, are widely hunted, but the elusive gray is a challenging target as well as excellent table fare. Red squirrels are too small to be considered a major game species but are often shot as pests. Squirrels may be hunted during late summer in certain states, but are mainly a fall game animal. A dog may be used to help locate and distract squirrels.

Cottontail Rabbit



Identification

The cottontail is one of the most hunted small game animals in the United States. The body coat color is brownish or grayish with a cottony-white tail. The nape patch is rusty and the leg pelage is white. Coat color may vary from area to area.

Cottontails are 14 to 17 inches (35 to 44 cm) long and weigh from 2 to 4 pounds (.74 to 1.5 kg) when mature.

Habits

The cottontail rabbit, or any of its related subspecies, can be found throughout the United States. Its habitat varies with the subspecies and may include heavy brush, strips of forest with open areas nearby, edges of swamps, weed patches, rocky foot hills, marshes and canebrake swamps.

Cottontails are most active from early evening to late morning. They spend most of the day in partial concealment, underground beneath brush piles or among rocks. Green vegetation is their main food in the spring and summer and bark, twigs and buds are primary winter foods. Home range for a cottontail may take in 3 to 20 acres.

Young are born between March and May, but litters may be dropped as late as September. A doe may have 3 to 4 litters each year with 4 to 7 young per litter. Gestation takes 26½ to 30 days and the young are born with their eyes closed. Nesting areas usually are depressions in the ground which the doe lines with her body fur.

The cottontail rabbit is a favorite with the young hunter and it provides excellent table fare.

Snowshoe Hare



Identification

The snowshoe hare is dark brown in summer and almost pure white in winter. The winter pelage, however, is only white on the tips of the hairs while the band of hair beneath is a yellowish color.

The snowshoe rabbit is 13 to 18 inches long (33 to 46 cm) and weighs between 2 to 4 pounds (.74 to 1.5 kg). It is named for its large, heavily-furred hind feet. The snowshoe's ears are $3\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 inches (8.7 to 10 cm) long.

Habits

The snowshoe hare is found in the northern, western and eastern portions of the United States. In the northern and eastern areas, it lives in swamps, forests and thickets. In the western areas, it is found in mountainous sections. A nocturnal animal, the snowshoe remains quiet during the day, concealed among brush and trees.

Snowshoe hares feed on green vegetation during the summer and on twigs, buds and bark during the winter months. They also are fond of frozen meat. Home range for the snowshoe is about 10 acres, but it may travel as far as a mile.

The gestation period is 36 to 37 days. The does usually have 2 to 3 litters a year with 2 to 4 young in each litter. The young are born with their eyes open. Snowshoe hare populations fluctuate greatly, with population peaks about every 11 years.

The flesh of the snowshoe hare is excellent and hunting this animal is truly sporting. It is well to remember that the snowshoe will run in a very large circle when pursued by trailing hounds.

Raccoon



Identification

The raccoon is a medium sized, stocky mammal with a prominent, black mask around its eyes and a heavily furred, ringed tail about half the length of the head and body. The adults are grizzled brown and black strongly mixed with yellow on the back. The underparts are dull brown, grizzled with yellowish-gray. The dark rings on the tail vary in number from 4 to 7 and are more pronounced above than they are below.

An adult raccoon is 26 to 38 inches long (66 to 96.5 cm) and has a tail 8 to 12 inches (20 to 30.4 cm) long. Males will weigh 8 to 25 pounds (3.6 to 11.3 kg), while females will weigh 7 to 18 pounds (3.0 to 7.0 kg).

Habits

The raccoon is found from the northern areas of Canada to as far south as South America, with the exception of

the Rocky Mountain region. They thrive along stream and lake borders where there are wooded areas and rock cliffs nearby. Raccoons are expert climbers and they swim well.

Both plant and animal matter is eaten, depending on what is available. The plant food includes grapes, plums, chokecherries and blackberries, corn, acorns and other nuts. The animal food consists of birds, bird eggs, crayfish, clams, fish and various insects.

The gestation period is 63 days and the young are born from April through May. There is one litter a year, with 2 to 7 young in a litter.

Raccoons are hunted with dogs and about three-quarters of the harvest is taken in that manner; the remainder is trapped. They are hunted and trapped for their fur as well as the excellent meat they provide.

Bobcat



Identification

The bobcat varies from reddish-brown to tawny gray in color with an overlay of variable darker markings or spots. The tail has several dark bars across the top and a broad, black bar or spot bordering the tip which is white. The ear tufts are short and not conspicuous.

The body length of a mature bobcat is 25 to 30 inches (62.5 to 75 cm) and the tail length will be about 5 inches (12.5 cm). An adult animal will weigh 15 to 35 pounds (5.6 to 13.1 kg).

Habits

The bobcat is found throughout the United States except in the northcentral region of the country. The major habitat for bobcats are chaparral areas in the western part of the

country and swamps and forests in the East.

The bobcat preys heavily on small game, especially rabbits. However, because of population fluctuations of the rabbit, it supplements its diet with mice, rats, squirrels and birds such as grouse, woodcock and wild turkeys. The bobcat prefers fresh meat and it rarely stores a kill for consumption later.

The breeding season differs with the location but usually occurs during the first quarter of the year. From 2 to 4 young are born following a gestation period of 60 days.

All of the senses of the bobcat are sharp but it relies mainly on its keen eyesight and hearing to avoid detection. The animal is hunted for its fur.

Lynx



Identification

The lynx is the northern counterpart of the bobcat. It is distinguished by its short tail which is black at the tip and its tufted ears. The gray to pale yellow or tan coat color of the lynx is lighter than that of the bobcat.

An adult lynx will be 32 to 36 inches (80 to 90 cm) long, its tail will be about 4 inches (10 cm) in length and it will weigh 15 to 30 pounds (5.9 to 11.2 kg). The females are usually smaller.

Habits

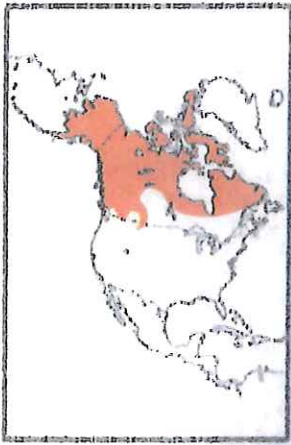
The lynx is found in the northern most regions of the United States and in the Canadian provinces. Forested areas and swamps make up the prime habitat of this species. The lynx is a nocturnal, solitary animal. It has extremely large feet

padded with fur, enabling it to move swiftly and easily in deep snow.

The diet of the lynx is made up mainly of snowshoe hares and supplemented with rodents and birds when the snow shoe population is low. The lynx mates in January or February and after a gestation period of some 62 days bears its young in March or April. Dens are located in hollow logs, large tree stumps or other sheltered areas.

Lynx populations fluctuate over the years with peak populations occurring every 9 to 10 years. These population fluctuations appear to parallel but lag slightly behind population fluctuations of the snowshoe hare, the lynx's prime food source. The lynx is hunted or trapped primarily for its fur.

Wolverine



Tracks 5"

Identification

The wolverine somewhat resembles a small bear. Its pelage is a dark-brown, paler on the head, with two yellowish stripes running down the back, starting at the shoulders and joining at the rump. The feet are large for the size of the animal.

A mature individual will be 29 to 32 inches (72.5 to 80 cm) long with a tail about 7 to 9 inches (17.5 to 22.5 cm). The animal will weigh from 35 to 60 pounds (13.1 to 22.4 kg).

Habits

The wolverine inhabits the high mountains of western North America, near the timberline and as far as the tundra in the far northern reaches of the continent.

A solitary animal, the wolverine may be active any time of the day or night. Its diet consists of small birds and animals supplemented with eggs and berries. It has a reputation as a robber of traps and a destroyer of food caches. The wolverine will travel extensively in search of food.

The mating season is from April through August. Females bear a litter every 2 to 3 years on the average and give birth to 2 to 3 young in each litter. Dens are located in sheltered areas such as root depressions of large trees and undercut ledges.

Wolverines are hunted for their fur and they are hunted by trappers to prevent the animals from damaging their traplines.

Gray Fox



Identification

The gray fox has a feline-like appearance. Its coat is a pepper and salt color with buff-colored underfur. The tail is long and bushy with a median black stripe down its length and a black tip. The rusty-yellowish sides of the animal's neck, the back of its ears, legs and feet serve to distinguish it from other foxes.

A mature gray fox will measure 21 to 29 inches (52.5 to 72.5 cm) long. It will weigh 7 to 13 pounds (2.6 to 4.8 kg) and its tail will be 11 to 16 inches (27.5 to 40 cm) in length.

Habits

The gray fox is found in the southern, eastern and western parts of the United States. It prefers brushy forests and rim

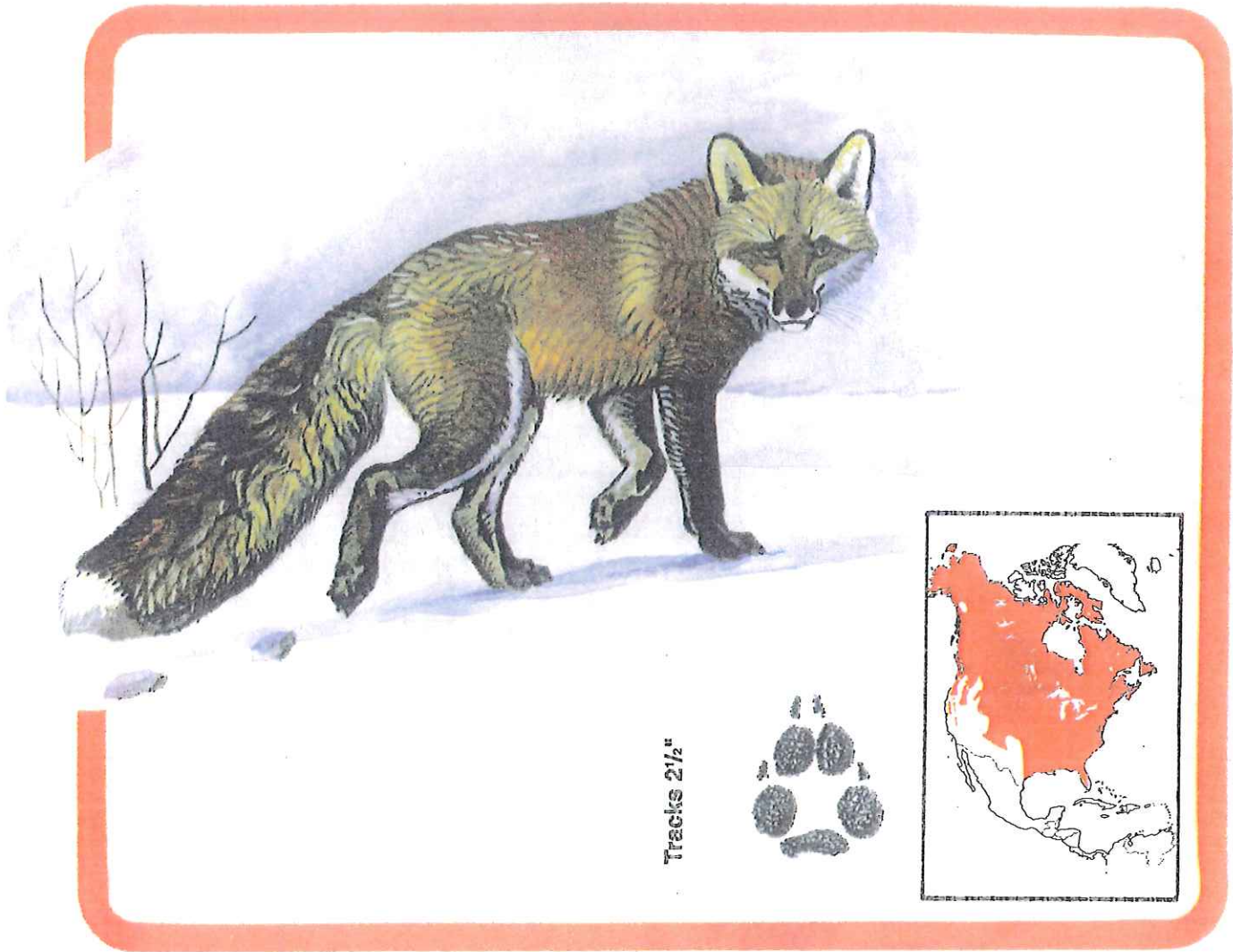
rock country for its habitat. It dens in hollow logs, beneath boulders and sometimes in ground burrows.

Chiefly nocturnal and very secretive, the gray fox will climb trees to escape pursuit. Its major food is small animals but it also feeds on insects, fruits, acorns, birds and bird eggs.

Mating occurs in February and March. The gestation period lasts about 51 days. The young, which are born with their eyes closed, arrive between April and May. There usually are 3 to 7 pups in a litter.

Gray fox are hunted for sport and for their fur, which in most years is less valuable than that of the red fox.

Red Fox



Tracks 2 1/2"

Identification

The red fox has a dog-like appearance. Its pelage is reddish yellow. The coat is darkest on the back, the under parts are light and the bushy tail has a blend of black hairs and it is tipped with white. The legs, feet and ears are black. Many color variations may be seen from area to area, ranging from reddish-yellow to black.

A mature red fox is 22 to 25 inches (55 to 62.5 cm) long. Its tail will measure 14 to 16 inches (35 to 40 cm) in length and the animal will weigh 10 to 15 pounds (37.3 to 55.9 kg).

Habits

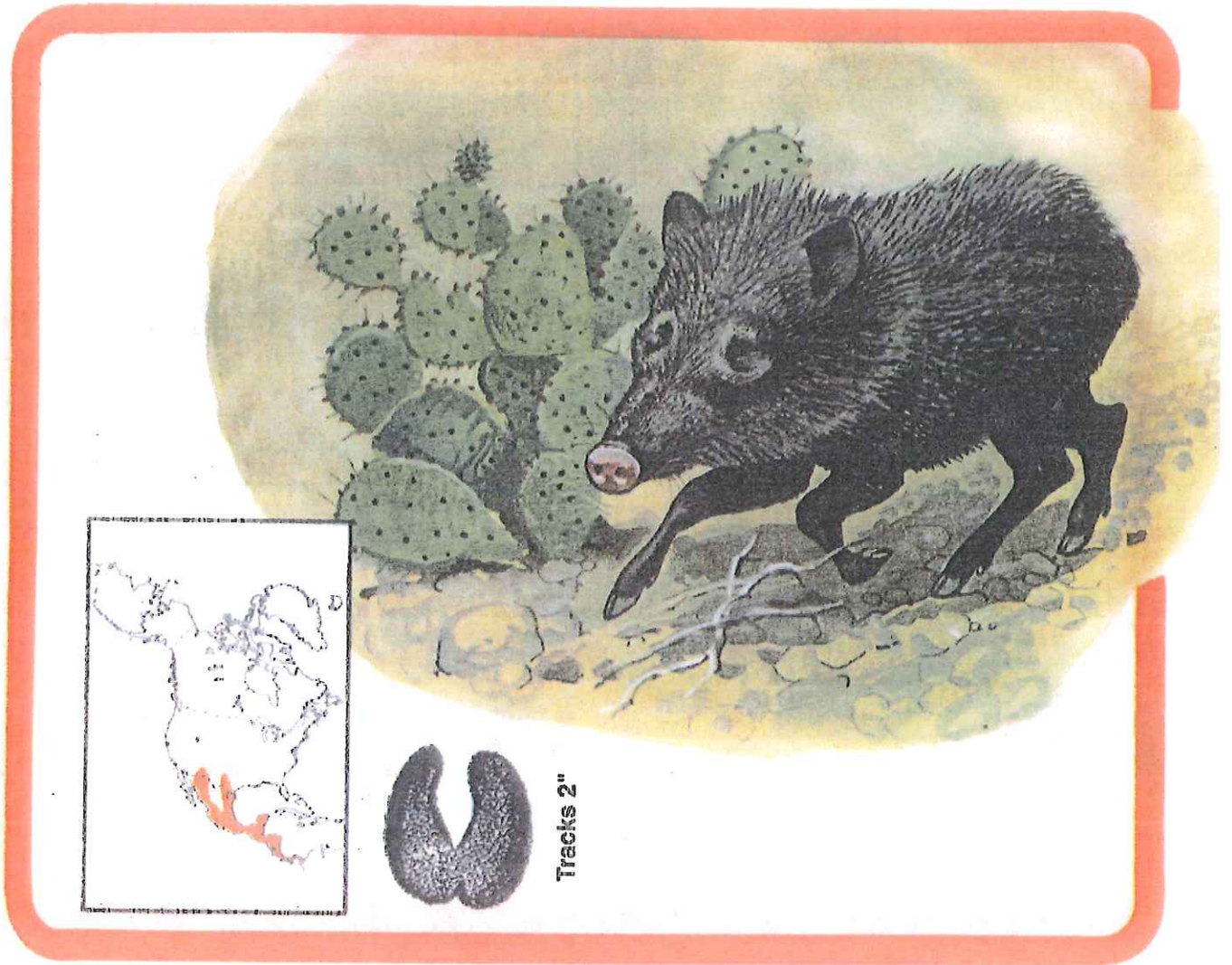
The red fox ranges over most of the United States with the exception of an area just east of the Rocky Mountains, extending north and south from the Canadian border to Mexico. This species prefers a mixture of forest and open country.

The red fox is most active during the night, early morning and late evening. Its food consists of prey animals ranging in size from insects to hares. Berries and fruits round out the animal's diet.

The young are born in March or April, depending on the part of the country. Vixens bear one litter per year with 4 to 9 pups in the litter. Gestation lasts about 51 days. Nests are located in dens dug usually on slopes in porous soil.

Home range for the red fox is 1 to 2 square miles but individuals have been known to travel greater distances, especially during the winter. Red fox are hunted with hounds or the aid of a predator call which is used to lure the fox to the hunter. The animal is hunted and trapped for sport and for its fur.

Javelina



Identification

The javelina is a small, dark, pig-like mammal inhabiting southwestern United States and Mexico. It has thick, bristly hair which grows particularly long about the head and neck where it forms a whitish collar.

Sometimes called the collared peccary, the javelina is 18 to 22 inches (45 to 55.9 cm) at the shoulder and weighs 30 to 60 pounds (13.6 to 27.2 kg). The hair on the neck may grow to a length of 6 inches (15.2 cm), making the animal appear much larger than it is. Both sexes have a musk gland located beneath the long hair in the middle of the back which produces a strong scent.

Habits

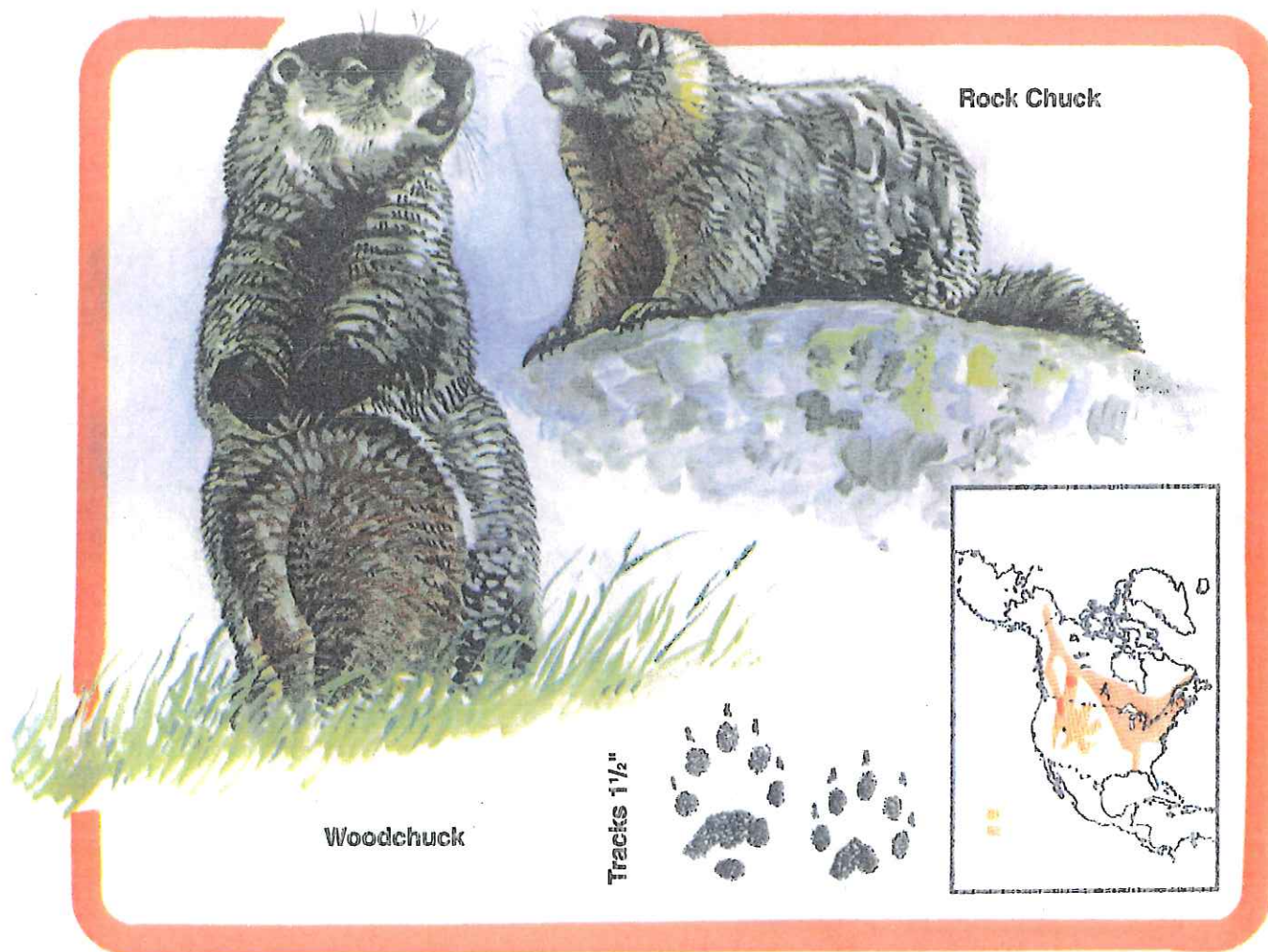
Javelinas move about in herds of 6 to 20 animals. In the arid Southwest climate, the animals bed down in shaded thickets during the heat of the day and forage for food

early and late in the day or at night. They feed on cactus fruits, desert beans and berries, acorns, pine nuts and tubers which they root out of the ground. Javelinas obtain water by eating succulent desert plants and they also frequent water holes where they are available.

While their sense of smell and hearing are acute, their eyesight is poor. When alarmed, javelinas make clicking sounds with their teeth. Although nervous and excitable, the only attacks upon man have come in the form of bites from animals kept as pets.

Javelinas are legal game in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico. They are difficult to find and are more often bagged incidentally by deer hunters. The meat is excellent and not affected by the scent glands which can be removed with the skin.

Woodchucks and Rock Chucks



Identification

Woodchucks and rock chucks are similar in size and appearance, and both are heavy-bodied, burrowing rodents with grizzled gray fur. The eastern woodchuck is browner on the belly with a yellowish or reddish cast and black feet. The western rock chuck is more yellowish brown underneath and has a white area between the eyes, and brownish or yellowish feet. Individuals of both species may be either all black or all white. Both woodchuck and rock chuck weigh from 4-14 pounds (1.8-6.3 kg), and are much heavier in the summer than when emerging from hibernation in the spring. Woodchucks are often called "groundhog," while rock chucks are more often referred to as "yellow-bellied marmot."

Habits

The woodchuck is found in forested and farming country throughout eastern North America. Originally a forest animal, it has benefited by the opening of the land to

agriculture, and its burrows are found on the edges of many farm fields. Rock chucks are restricted to the Rocky Mountain region, and burrow among the talus slopes and foothills, usually near a large boulder.

Chucks are considered pests by most landholders due to their fondness for hay and garden crops as well as their burrowing tendencies. They have the habit of sitting upright looking for danger, and when alarmed give a shrill chirp or whistle. Between 2 and 6 young are born in spring and remain with the mother until midsummer.

Woodchuck hibernates October through February; Rock chuck between September and May. Both are active mainly during daylight hours, and often sun themselves in an open spot with a good view of danger.

Chucks offer the big game hunter an excellent opportunity to test his marksmanship before the big game season, while doing the landowner a service by eliminating a pest species.

Opossum



Identification

The opossum is a medium-sized animal. It has long, coarse fur, a long, prehensile tail which is scaly and naked, a slender muzzle, thin, naked ears and short legs. The female has a prominent fur-lined pouch on her belly. The fur is a grayish-white but the front and hind quarters are darker and the belly is lighter in color.

An adult is 24 to 34 inches long (60.9 to 86.3 cm) and the tail is 9.5 to 15 inches (24.1 to 38.1 cm) in length. Opossums reach a weight of 4 to 15 pounds (1.8 to 6.8 kg). Males are larger than the females.

Habits

The opossum is distributed throughout most of the eastern, central and southern regions of the United States. It prefers wooded areas near streams but is at home anywhere it is

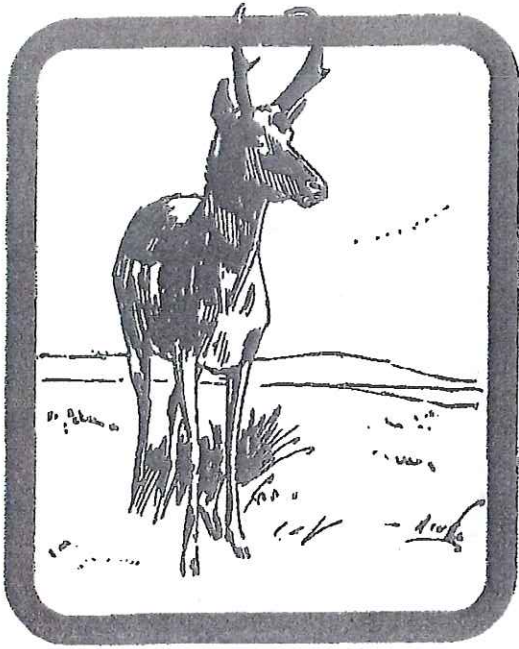
dry, sheltered and safe. This shy, nocturnal animal is most often observed by roadsides. It is well-adapted to climbing and can hang by its tail for short periods.

Opossums eat a variety of food but prefer animal matter. Their diet includes grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and ants, birds and bird eggs, crayfish, earthworms and carrion. Fruits are eaten in the fall and early winter.

Mating takes place about the first three weeks of February and the gestation period is only 12 to 13 days. Up to 14 young are born at one time. There may be two or more litters a year. The young are not able to see at birth and are incompletely developed.

Opossum are hunted for their fur and, in some parts of the country, for their flesh.

Notes



Only a limited number of North America's many species of wildlife have been treated in this section. For further information on North American wildlife, the following publications are among those that would be useful:

Game Birds of North America - Rue and Allen
Big Game of North America - Wildlife Management Institute
North American Big Game - Nesbitt and Parker
Wildlife and America - Brokaw

Various field guides such as those in the Peterson Field Guides Series

Vertebrates of the United States - Blair
The Alien Animals - Laycock
Ducks, Geese and Swans of North America - Frank C. Bellrose

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