

# Another sign of global warming?

There are many signs of what some call global warming here in Antrim County, and recently, my son and I ran right into another one.



By LINDA GALLAGHER

Visiting for a few days from his newly adopted home of the Eastern Shore of Maryland, where he now lives with his wife and young son and teaches at a local high school, Jamie had said he'd enjoy a squirrel hunt, something he did frequently as a young hunter when growing up here in Antrim County.

I hadn't done any squirrel hunting at all in almost two years, so we shouldered our .22 rifles, contacted a nearby land owner and with permission in hand, headed out to a piece of private property in rural Kearney Township where we had once enjoyed premier squirrel hunting.

Surrounded by corn fields, this piece of property boasts mature beech trees mixed with balsam and basswood, perfect habitat for both gray and fox squirrels. In fact, a few years previously, a hunt we'd conducted on this property had been showcased on the Michigan Out Of Doors television show, prompting a comical comment from a local viewer that he didn't know wood chucks could climb trees-the fox squirrels looked that big.

A natural gas pipeline had recently pierced the pristine quality of the woods, my son and I noticed when we walked in, but other than that, the familiar forest looked just as good as it always had.

Until we climbed to the top of the first ridge-and with the wind in our favor, walked right into an unsuspecting gray fox.

My son, who had never seen a gray fox before, was quite excited. But I wasn't so thrilled.

I have seen gray foxes in Antrim County before, but only in the last few years. Not native to northern Michigan, the gray fox is a relative wildlife newcomer, like the opossum, another possible sign of global warming which was first spotted in this area about 25 years ago.

Smaller and somewhat nastier than his cousin the red fox, the gray fox is known for his quick temper and aggressive behavior. Until just a few years ago a denizen of only the southern portion of North America, gray foxes are thought to be pushing *Vulpes vulpes*, Michigan's native red fox, out of their natural habitat throughout much of the lower peninsula.

And gray foxes have two other traits I don't care for-they have very little fear of anything, including people, and they climb trees.

Yes, a canine that climbs trees-like a cat. And being nocturnal in nature, they do much of their hunting in those trees at night.

Which means they not only include all manner of rodents, eggs, vegetation, and insects in their diet, they also enjoy birds and small



mammals such as squirrels.

Sure enough, there wasn't so much as a bushy tail to be seen or a chatter to be heard in the forest that had once held a wealth of gray, black and big brown fox squirrels.

It wasn't much of a squirrel hunt.

I don't know if the presence of the gray fox in our midst is an indication of global warming or not. I just know that invasive species, such as zebra mussels and phragmites, even possums and gray foxes, are changing our world.

And not for the better.