



Red Fox

Vulpes vulpes



The red fox is a small, thickly-furred mammal of the family Canidae, which in addition to foxes, includes dogs, coyotes, and wolves. There is much color variation within the red fox species; black, brown or silver individuals are not unusual, but red is the most prevalent color. Red foxes usually have black paws, black behind the large, upright ears, and a bit of blackish coloring around the muzzle. A lighter or white coloration occurs on the underside of the throat, down the chest, and under the torso. The red fox has a lustrous, long fur coat and a large, bushy tail that may be spotted black, yellow or gray, and can be tipped in white or black.

The average adult size is comparable to that of a small dog. Red fox are agile and lightly built, with a sharply tapered face and pointed ears. Males tend to be slightly larger than females. The average male weighs approximately 13 to 15 pounds and stands 26 to 28 inches tall. Foxes range in length from 35 to 42 inches, with the tail comprising about one-third of the total body length. Size varies according to geographic location: those in northern regions tend to be larger.

Diet

Red foxes are largely carnivorous, although they eat a varied diet that includes plants. The majority of their diet consists of invertebrates, such as insects, mollusks, earthworms and crayfish. They do also eat some plant material, especially blackberries, apples, plums and other fruit. Common prey includes rodents (such as mice and voles), rabbits, birds, eggs, amphibians, small reptiles and fish.

Population

Native to boreal areas of North America, in the 1750s, the European red fox was introduced into the eastern coastal areas of the U.S. and likely interbred with the native red fox to produce a hybrid of both types of fox. Before the collapse of the fur trade, the red fox's fur was highly valued, and the red fox was heavily hunted. With the fall of the fur trade and innovative fencing techniques by farmers to protect their poultry, the hunting and trapping of foxes has declined. Though the red fox's numbers are improving throughout the U.S, it still struggles to compete with coyotes for habitat.

Range

The red fox occurs over most of North America and Eurasia, with populations also introduced to Australia and Northern Africa. An "edge species" they prefer a mixture of forest and open fields, with the transition zone or "edge" between these habitats particularly favored. Foxes typically range over an area of about two to four square miles, although this varies widely based on the availability of prey.

Behavior

Red fox are most active at dawn and dusk (crepuscular), but may become nocturnal in suburban and urban areas with lots of human activity and artificial lighting. They are sighted frequently because they prefer open habitats and it is not unusual to see a red fox at any time during the day.

In general, each fox claims its own territory, pairing up only in the winter, and foraging alone in the summer. They usually hunt alone, using their acute sense of

hearing to locate small mammals in thick grass, then jumping high in the air to pounce on the prey. They also stalk prey, keeping hidden until close enough to catch them in a short dash. Foxes tend to be extremely possessive of their food and will not share it with others.

Socially, the fox communicates with body language and a variety of vocalizations. Its vocal range is quite large and varies widely. Vocalizations include the "Wow-wow-wow" bark, the "Alarm Bark" which sounds like a muffled cough, "Gekkering" which is a stuttering throaty noise used in aggressive encounters, and the "Vixen's Wail" an eerie wail used during breeding season. It also communicates with scent, marking food and territorial boundary lines with urine and feces.

Reproduction

The red fox primarily forms monogamous pairs each winter, which cooperate to raise their litter. After a gestation period of about 50 days, they give birth to a litter which averages 4 or 5 pups, but may be as large as 13. Most foxes have more than one den and will readily move their young if disturbed. The pups stay in the den until about 4 to 5 weeks of age, after which they emerge and begin to play outside the den entrance. Both adults care for the young by bringing food and guarding the den site. At about 12 weeks, the pups are weaned and join the adults on hunts, learning to catch food on their own. In the fall, the young disperse and will usually breed during their first winter at about one year old.

Man and Foxes

The red fox has both positive and negative standing with humans, being both loved and hated. This has been most visible in the United Kingdom where fox hunting with dogs was a traditional sport until this was made illegal in recent years. The fox is featured in much folklore usually as a wily villain, though sometimes also as the underdog who triumphs over human efforts to control or destroy it.

Foxes, especially red foxes, commonly live in close association with human residences and communities. They frequently inhabit yards, parks, and golf courses. Healthy foxes pose virtually no danger to humans. Foxes can grow accustomed to human activity but are seldom aggressive toward people. People uncomfortable with the presence of foxes near their homes should remove attractants, use fencing, and employ scaring techniques. In many cases, homeowner's perceptions of these wild animals being a "problem" are unfounded as they believe that the mere presence of a fox is a problem. In reality, foxes play an important role in controlling rodent populations and eliminating healthy foxes is not warranted based solely on human safety concerns.

Did you know?

- The red fox is the most common species of the fox.
- If a fox catches more food than it can eat, it will bury the extra food (cache) to store it for later, covering it with soil, grass, leaves, or snow and marking it with urine.
- A fox's hearing is so sharp they can hear a watch ticking 40 yards away.
- A female fox is called a vixen, a baby fox is a "kit" and a group of foxes is called a "skulk."
- Red foxes can run at over 30 miles per hour!
- The fox is considered to be a sacred animal in Japan.