



Fox (Red)

Red Fox:

Vulpes vulpes



Distribution:

found throughout the British Isles including Ireland, but absent from most islands. Also native to the rest of Europe and North America, Asia, North Africa. Introduced to Australia and New Zealand in mid-19th century.

Red fox (Image courtesy of freestockphoto.com)

Habitat:

almost all habitats - woods, farmland, coasts, mountains, towns and cities

Description:

dog-like appearance with pointed muzzle and bushy, white-tipped tail ("brush"). Reddish-brown coat; lower legs and backs of ears are black.

Size:

length; male (dog):- 112 cm. (tail is a third of this). Female (vixen):- 108 cm.

Life-span:

18 months to 2 years in the wild; a few may be lucky and live to around eight years. Up to 14 years in captivity.

Food:

earthworms, rabbits, rodents, birds, insects, fruit, carrion (dead animals); coastal foxes eat gulls' eggs. Urban foxes scavenge for leftovers.

The red fox is the most widespread and numerous predator in Britain. Although man has persecuted the fox for centuries, it is still a very common animal. Its success is mainly due to its ability to live almost anywhere. It has even moved into cities in recent years.

Fox Habits**Territory.**

A dog and vixen and their cubs; group members also include between one and four other foxes, males and females, perhaps from the litter born the previous year. Although foxes live in a family group, they spend much of their time alone. A fox's range varies according to its habitat; the home range of an urban fox covers

between 25 and 50 hectares (1 hectare = 2 football pitches) whereas a country fox may wander over 2,000 or more hectares.

Daily Life.

Foxes are mostly active at night, their eyes being specially adapted to night-time vision. The fox's hearing is also excellent, helping it to locate prey easily. Throughout the hours of the night a fox will roam its territory, foraging for whatever food is available. A country fox will eat carcasses or kill small mammals, especially voles and rabbits; in summer it will eat beetles and fruits in the autumn.

A town fox visits households that regularly put out food for them and generally scavenge for anything edible. Town foxes are sometimes accused of killing and eating cats but they rarely interfere with each other's activities - and an adult cat is more than a match for a fox who is likely to be the first to back down in confrontation! A fox may, however, take a pet rabbit or guinea-pig if it is not caged securely. Earthworms are an important part of the diet of all foxes. Any spare food is often buried for later, although another member of the family group may find it first! Although foxes forage alone, members of the group do meet up briefly, perhaps to play or groom each other. During the daytime, foxes usually rest somewhere, perhaps under bushes, in the lower branches of a tree, in a sunny spot on a low roof or under a garden shed.

Breeding.

Foxes breed only once a year, most mating occurring in January or early February. Courting foxes can be heard barking or uttering unearthly screams; the dog and vixen hunt and travel together for about three weeks before mating. The vixen looks for a suitable den or 'earth' - she may dig one under tree roots, or find a hole in a rock crevice, under a garden shed or even in a pile of rubbish!

A litter of four or five cubs is born after a gestation period of 53 days in March or April. They are blind, have round faces and short ears, and are covered with dark, chocolate brown fur.

The vixen stays with her cubs in the earth until they are two weeks old, relying on the dog fox to bring her food. The cubs grow quickly, their eyes opening when 10-14 days old. At around 4-5 weeks they begin to come out of the earth and their dark fur starts to change to red-brown. Non-breeding vixens in the family group may help the mother to rear her cubs. As the cubs grow up they play, squabble and fight amongst themselves. From as early as four weeks old they fight quite viciously - sometimes even to the death - and in this way they establish their social position.

In October and November most of the young dog foxes and some of the vixens leave the home territory to try

and establish territories of their own. Others stay at home. At this time of year many young foxes are killed by cars, dogs etc., or die of starvation or cold during a hard winter. About 55% of foxes die in their first year without having had a chance to breed and 80% die before they are three years old.

The short life-span of a fox means that females will breed only two or three times on average, while males usually only mate once.

Foxes and Man

The fox has been hunted by man for thousands of years. Its thick red fur has always been in demand; an increase in the popularity of fox fur in the late 1970s caused many more foxes than usual to be killed. However, with the decline in fur prices, this trade has decreased substantially. Foxes are also hunted for 'sport' with specially bred foxhounds - an issue which causes much debate; many people think that foxhunting is a cruel and unnecessary activity.

Farmers have always considered the fox a pest because it will prey on poultry and lambs. Nowadays, most chickens are caged up securely so the fox rarely gets the chance to steal them. Foxes have often been accused of killing lambs but they rarely attack strong, healthy lambs; they may, however, take sickly and dead ones. Even though thousands of foxes are killed in Britain every year by hunting and shooting, the overall population does not seem to be affected and foxes are in no danger of becoming rare.

In continental Europe, foxes carry the fatal disease rabies. If a rabid fox bites a pet dog, which in turn bites a person, the virus can be passed on to man. Great Britain is free of rabies but should it ever be accidentally introduced it may possibly be transmitted quickly through the fox population, particularly the urban one. Detailed studies of urban foxes are being carried out and the more we know about their social life the better we can plan how to deal with any future occurrence of rabies.

