

Living with Wildlife – Red Foxes

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The Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) belongs to the same family, the Canidae, as domestic dogs, coyotes, and grey wolves. It appears larger than it actually is due to its bushy tail and long slender body, however, it weighs only between 4– 7 kilograms or roughly the same size as the average house cat.

They are most active at night but can be seen at dusk or early morning. Their food consists of mice, voles, rabbits, hares, crickets, grasshoppers, and plant material like acorns, berries and apples. Because of their relatively small stomachs, red foxes cache a lot of their food under leaves or snow for future requirements.

Red foxes have excellent eyesight, a keen sense of smell and acute hearing. I would sometimes watch a red fox on a snow covered field standing quite motionless, with head cocked to one side before it leaped into the air and pounced on an unsuspecting mouse tunneling under the snow.

Dog foxes (males) and vixens (females) are usually, but not always, monogamous or have only one mate. They breed between mid-January and mid-March with the young born from March through May. The den is often an abandoned woodchuck burrow, a patch of dense bush or an excavation under a barn or other structure. We found, similar to other wild mammals, foxes often choose to have their young closer to humans to afford them more protection from predators.

Newborn foxes can be easily mistaken for boxer puppies given their square muzzle and brown pelage or coat. When raising orphan foxes at the Wildlife Centre, it was always fascinating to see the stages of development as they ‘grew’ into being a fox, with the muzzle becoming more elongated and the coat increasingly reddish in colour.

Parenting is shared, with the dog fox bringing food for the vixen when the pups are newborn and both adults bringing food for the young once weaned as well as teaching them to hunt when old enough. The young disperse in the autumn.

Red foxes are highly intelligent and, from our experience at the Wildlife Centre, they also exhibit a highly developed sense of playfulness. Something that golf courses know as foxes were frequently seen stealing golf balls off the course. On one occasion, a fox stole a shoe that had been left on a deck. When the owner tried to retrieve it, the fox would run a few feet and lie down with the shoe in its mouth and a lopsided grin on its face.

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