

# Juba Contemplates the Fox

by Penny Randell

I have enjoyed being back to discuss various species that we deal with on a daily basis. This is Juba again and I'm looking forward to a new year of sharing valuable information with everyone. Considering commonly seen critters, the fox is high on the list. A simple description of such is that the fox is a medium-sized omnivorous (able to eat anything), mammal belonging to several genera within the Canidae family. This is the same family as the dog, except that the fox has a flattened skull with upright, triangular pointed ears, a long and lanky rostrum, and a long bushy tail called a brush. When considering species, the genus group *Vulpes*, or "true foxes" is composed of 12 members.

These guys are remarkably prolific and can be found on every continent except Antarctica. Above all others, the red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) stands as the most common, which does include 47 subspecies throughout the world. More than anything, it is the nature of the fox that has subsidized its success. Foxes are known to be shrewd and perceptive as they meld with human societies, often accepted purely for these traits. These animals are smaller than some members of Canidae, for example: the wolf and jackal. However, once again the red fox stands separate from other foxes, as they are the largest of the species. The smallest species is called a fennec fox, which weights 1 ½ pounds to 3 ½ pounds, whereas the red fox comes in at a robust 9 to 19 ½ pounds.

The fox has partially retractable claws that are primary to their ability to move rapidly. Unlike other Canidae, the fox walks on his toes. When it comes to vibrissae, or whiskers, they are black in color and can be found on the muzzle, with shorter ones located on the head. All foxes differ when it comes to fur. Each species varies in fur color, density, and length. The coat can be brilliant white, black, black-and-white, red, and some are grey on their tummies. Kit foxes and fennec foxes are designed for life in the desert and sport huge ears and short hair for cooling. Those that live in the Arctic have small ears, short limbs, and thick, insulating fur. A red fox typically has an auburn coat. Too, coat color can change with the season as well as age. Foxes are capable of molting once a year so that they can handle warmer weather. This begins around the feet and continues up its body to its back.

Now we take a look, or a listen if you are so lucky, to the various vocalizations of the fox. There is such thing as a whine, which is audible just after birth. Both the mom and dad whine as they respond to the baby kits, caring for them until they fall asleep. The yelp, or infantile bark begins around 19 days later and is heard mostly when the kits are playing together. Next comes the explosive call, which is a high-pitched howl offered to frighten predators or alert outside cubs. We move to the adult calls from here and recognize the combative call and the opened-mouth that usually accompanies it. Then there's the basic growl that controls the kits, and the bark, used to warn intruders.

As I already said, it is the fox's nature that enables it to become a part of human society. For certain the fox can be particularly genial and unreservedly communicative. It is a relief to know that these mammals pose little to no threat to household pets. Whew! That's really good news to me, for I live in the woods. Anyway, although they are mainly solitary animals, they can easily co-exist

with others. Indeed, many of these fellers often prefer a home in the suburbs and cities. It is now somewhat commonplace to find foxes playing in cemeteries and parks.

A fox's eyesight proves that he was designed to be nocturnal. They can see in the dark and have a specialized lens to account for this. In addition, they are naturally solitary. But, we must entertain the effects of both evolution and mankind and how they have altered the life of a fox. It turns out that over time they have become crepuscular, or going out in the daylight hours and especially at twilight. Foxes that do live in urban area, and especially those that somehow became a human's pet, often adapt their sleeping regimen to the world around them and thereby their overall behavior as well.

The fox has always been seen as a magical being that is scarcely understood. For one thing, most are monogamous and mate for life. They can even burrow into the ground. Human development, which initially pushed these animals into the urban scene, hasn't really revealed all that much understanding thus far. That's saying a lot with our interaction with foxes becoming so common. However, if you are going to interface with these wild ones, it had best be done from a distance. Observation should rule over contact. Many folks have given into feeding these animals, but that, too, is a bad idea. The last thing they need is to do is lessen or dull their hunting instincts. Tools sharpened to aid in survival are paramount. What happens if for some reason the human feeding ends? Most often the fox will turn to trash cans, which doesn't do much good for anyone.

When in the wild alone, the lifespan of a fox is one to three years. Some, especially those in captivity can live up to ten years. Most foxes will eat anything they find, but some...such as the crab-eating fox... saves itself for a specialized diet. These critters are known to eat 2.2 pounds of food a day, caching excess food as they go along. A pouncing technique is used for hunting. They crouch down to camouflage themselves within the terrain and then use their hind legs to pounce on their prey. Their enlarged canine teeth enable the fox to grab its victim by its neck and shake it until its dead.

Even after the male fox is completely grown, its scrotum dwells close to its body where its testes remain inside and safe. Oddly enough the testes of a red fox are smaller than the tiny Arctic fox. Sperm forms in August through September, with the testicles attaining their greatest weight in December through February. The female, or vixen comes into heat for one to six days, which equals a reproductive cycle of 12 months. The ova are shed internally during estrus without the stimulation of copulation. Once the eggs are fertilized the vixen experiences a gestation period of 52 to 53 days. When female foxes do mate they have an 80% chance of becoming pregnant. The litter size of a red fox is usually four to five kits. However, the Arctic fox can have up to 11 at a time.

At present several fox species are endangered in their natural setting. Foxes are under pressure from habitat loss and from being hunted for their fur or other trade. Because the fox is an opportunistic hunter and most industrious in their efforts, the animals are most often considered a nuisance. Still, they have been employed to control pests on fruit farms, never bothering the fruit in doing so.

The number of fox attacks on humans are rare, but they are greatly attracted to hens and rabbits. Although records show that many red foxes have become domesticated, this relaxed state does not usually last long. After all, a fox is a fox and they are wild animals. One exception to this rule is the Russian silver fox. After being handled for some time this animal has had significant physical and behavioral changes. Currently the domestication of these foxes has resulted in 50 years of experiments in Russia. Remarkably, a few of these kept critters experience physical changes frequently seen in domestic dogs and cats. There are records of pigmentation changes, floppy ears, and curly tails. Also, some of these domesticated beings became considerably tamer, even seeking physical attention from their keepers.

Well, it's great to be back with you folks. I hope you have learned something here and perhaps gain a greater appreciation for our furry friends. After all, these animals don't cause too much trouble and we have forced many into an urban situation. Keep your eyes open, for foxes are common. Thanks for reading my piece and take care out there.