

# On the Mountain

## Profiles of the Creatures & Features We Protect

### The Red Fox

*Vulpes fulvus*

by Steven Davison



DAN WALTERS PHOTOGRAPHY

Of the four North American foxes (red, gray, kit and arctic), the red fox is the most common and widespread, missing only from the deep Southeast, parts of the Great Plains, and some parts of the Southwest and Rocky Mountain states in the U.S. Of the lower 48 states, only Florida has no red foxes.

In coloration, its upper parts are reddish, black or mixed, and its under parts are white. The tip of the tail is also white. They weigh between eight and fourteen pounds and are 36 to 41 inches in length.

The red fox is not particularly fast (although spurts of 26 miles an hour have been reported), so she compensates with very sophisticated escape tactics. She doubles back on her trail, takes to water, hops along fences and stone walls like a circus performer, and goes underground to escape pursuers. These underground tunnels may have many exits, as many as 27, as recorded in one case.

Fox seem to enjoy living near farmland and clearing forest actually increases their range. They eat an amazing variety of foods: mice, rabbits, rats, ground-nesting birds, eggs, snakes, lizards, insects, fruit and berries of all kinds, grasses, and even clay and gravel in small quantities, probably for their minerals—and, of course, barnyard animals; not just ducks, geese and chickens, but even young lambs and pigs. Famous for killing more in the henhouse than they can carry off, this stems from

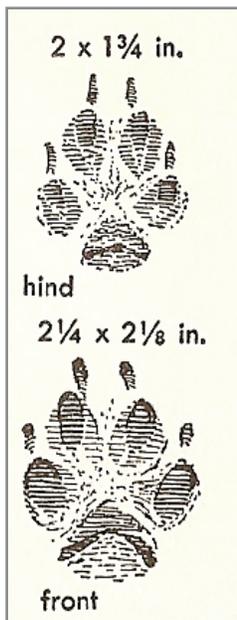
the fox's habit of killing as much as is at hand and storing what he cannot eat. The fox is fond of his meat "high", and stores the surplus until it is delightfully ripe. They also eat carrion and often drag road kill to their den.

The fox's summer range is about a mile in radius. They don't hibernate, so winter drives them farther abroad, covering up to twenty square miles.

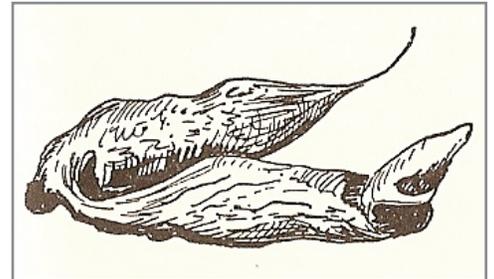
As to voice, the male fox yelps and the female yaps. It takes an expert to distinguish between the two, but the call of either is quite different from that of a coyote or domestic dog, and nothing at all like that of the wolf.

Fox mate when they are about a year old, usually in January or February, when the females come into an extremely short period of heat—only a few days.

The males remain with their mates till late fall. Vixen prefer woodchuck or porcupine burrows for dens, but may excavate their own, or find rock shelters or hollow logs. These burrows may be as long as 75 feet, with lots of side



Red fox track



Red fox scat

chambers for food storage and relocation when an old chamber becomes too soiled. Dens are relatively easy to find: debris will litter the area around the openings, with well-defined trails merging on the site.

Gestation of the kits takes from 50 to 53 days and anywhere from one to ten kits are born, though four to six is average. The male works very hard to feed the family while the female is nursing. By the end of the fourth or at least by the middle of the fifth week, the kits are out of the burrow, so you can look for them to emerge between late March and mid-May.

The kits are out of the den by then for at least a part of each day and the male will be traveling back and forth with food. Look for travel ways running between good hunting areas to a relatively undisturbed area likely to hold a den. Look for tracks and hair stuck to fence posts, logs and trees. Pick a perch up out of the way at dusk or dawn. Planting a dead animal near a trail will help. Watch for movement along hedges, fences, and bushes lining streams. The family remains together until late fall. 

The track and scat images come from Olaus J. Murie's *A Field Guide to Animal Tracks* (Houghton Mifflin, 1954).

The information for this article was taken from *North American Mammals*, by Robert A. Caras (Galahad Books, 1967)