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Natural History Notes

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THE RED FOX

The red fox is one of our best known mammals. It has been cited in the Old Testament as well as in Greek fables dating back to 600 B.C. So popular is this animal that its name is used countless times in our language. A foxy lady probably played fox and geese when she was a little girl and now dances the fox trot with her boy friend who dug a foxhole next to some foxglove while trying to outfox the enemy. Even this animal's scientific name, *Vulpes fulva*, which in Latin means reddish and cunning, is related to its character. This creature has always been admired as well as scorned for its clever and cunning antics and sly disposition.

Part of the fox's reputation is myth and part is based on fact. It is one of the most widely distributed mammals on earth; its range encompasses the entire northern hemisphere. The European and Asian red fox was given a different specific name but both species will freely interbreed and little noticeable difference exists between the two. Some say that the European red fox was brought over from England in the 1600's and is now mixed with our North American variety. The red fox occurs in all of the continental United States except Florida. In fact, in spite of civilization, hunting, bounties, etc., all indications are that the fox's range is expanding.

The red fox has two close relatives in the United States. The gray fox, sometimes called the tree fox for its climbing abilities, is not nearly as common as its red cousin. The smaller cousin is the rare swift fox which is found in the Southwest.

An adult red fox is up to 42 inches in length, including about 16 inches of tail, and weighs up to 14 pounds. The fox is strictly monogamous, has one mate, breeds in February or March and has four to ten offspring 51 days later. The kits are born blind and entirely helpless. Their eyes open in



RED FOX

about nine days and they remain in the den for up to five weeks. They remain under the mother's care for at least five months, when they are usually able to care for themselves, but the family may remain together until the next breeding season. The male also plays an important role in raising the family. Although he is not allowed in the den when the kits are very young, he brings food to his mate and guards the den, often risking his life to lead the enemy away. As the kits grow older, both parents teach them the skills of survival and the antics for which they are so famous. Their life span is about 12 years, but in the wild probably much less, given the infinite hazards of being a red fox.

The fur of this animal is valuable, bringing up to \$60 a pelt in today's market. The red fox is probably the world's greatest destroyer of mice, but also feeds on rabbits and other small mammals and birds and on domestic animals when it can. The benefits this valuable animal bring us far outweigh the damage it does. And the stories about the red fox are endless. Two that come to mind are the fox who jumped on a sheep's back and went for a ride to evade the hounds, and the flea-ridden fox who held a stick in his mouth like a cigar and slowly submerged himself until only the stick remained dry. When all the fleas took refuge on the dry stick the fox let it float away.

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