

## Red Fox

### *Vulpes vulpes*

With keen eyes and ears, a Red Fox follows the faint sounds and stirrings of a tiny Meadow Vole moving through the grass. After a few minutes, the fox pinpoints the exact location of the vole, leaps in the air and drops on its hapless victim with both forepaws. A quick bite and it's all over.

Also known as the coloured fox because of its different colour phases, this animal is an old world species with a wide distribution in the Northern Hemisphere.

### DISTRIBUTION

The Red Fox is at home in all parts of Yukon. It inhabits three main habitat types: White Spruce forests, subalpine areas of willow and Soapberry, and alpine tundra. Small numbers have begun to inhabit the Arctic tundra of the far north over the last century. One reason why the Red Fox is less abundant in the Arctic is because of competition with the Arctic Fox for food and territory and recent occupation of this area. The expansion of the Coyote's range into the Yukon has also affected Red Fox distribution.

Although population estimates are not available, it is thought that Yukon's population is fairly large and stable, due to this animal's ability to adapt to different and changing habitats.

### CHARACTERISTICS

Distinctive features of the Red Fox include its slender, tapering muzzle, very pointed ears, and long brush-like tail. With weight varying between 3.6 and 6.8 kilograms, it is considerably larger than the Arctic Fox, but about half the weight of a Coyote. Female Red Foxes (vixens) usually weigh about one kilogram less than males (dogs).

The Red Fox is easily recognizable in its red colour phase. The classic black stockings and cheek patches, and white throat and chest parts contrast vividly with the red coat. About half of all Red Foxes are of the red phase. Two other common colour phases, the cross, and the silver fox, are darker versions of the Red Fox.

The cross fox is so named because of a dark band of guard hairs which form a cross over the shoulders and back. Greyish brown in colour, the cross fox also has black legs and face markings, but due to the darker coat the contrast is not so evident. The silver fox is black with white tipped guard hairs which give it a silver sheen. A range of colour variations can occur within the same litter of pups.

### LIFE HISTORY

The Red Fox is a solitary, territorial animal. Territories average 295 hectares in size, and are often bounded by rivers or other natural barriers. Related foxes do not share home range resources. Females occupy smaller ranges than males, and it is thought that the sizes and shapes of home ranges are also related to the status of the individual and the local food sources. Although they are usually non-aggressive, Red Foxes engage in skirmishes at the onset of the mating season in mid-January.

Dominant dogs fend off other suitors attracted by receptive vixens. Inseparable after breeding, the mated pair traverses the countryside in search of a den. In mid-March, the vixen beds down in a renovated rodent burrow or an abandoned wolf den on a south facing hillside or stream bank. There she usually gives birth to four young, some fifty-two days after conception. The vixen is confined to the den during the pups' first few days of life, depending on her mate to supply food for her. But she soon begins to leave the den for short periods to forage on her own. The pups face several dangers while their mother is away, including predation by lynx and wolves.

During the first few months of life, the milk diet of the young pups is supplemented with semi-digested meat provided by both parents. By their third month, the pups have been weaned and under the vixen's critical eye, they begin learning to hunt. Playful interludes during their lessons help to develop the speed and agility so vital to the fox's survival. By fall, their hunting skills are well honed. The young foxes rely less on their parents and in early winter the family disbands, each fox going its own way to seek out a new home range.

The Red Fox spends the mornings and evenings of the cold Yukon winter roaming around the edges of snow covered clearings and ponds, foraging for mice, voles, shrews, Snowshoe Hare, and Common Muskrats. If a small group of ptarmigan or a Snowshoe Hare catches the fox's eye, it will slowly stalk its quarry until it is close enough for a sudden attack.

The melting snow and emerging plant life of early spring provide better hunting for the fox. Along with the renewed abundance of young voles and mice, the eggs of ground nesting ducks and marsh birds create dependable food sources. Grasses and sedges are also eaten in summer, and berries become important when they ripen in the fall. On the Arctic tundra, the Red Fox feeds mainly on Collared Lemming, Tundra Voles and Arctic Ground Squirrels.

#### THE RED FOX AND PEOPLE

Like other peoples, Yukon First Nations associate the Red Fox with mischief and mishap. Called "Smart Man" by the inland Tlingit, in legend the fox was blamed for the anguish of human death. If foxes were seen near a home it was considered a bad omen for those who lived there. Despite its role as a harbinger of ill fortune, Yukon First Nations also regarded the fox as a spirit helper.

Although its meat was not eaten, the fur of the Red Fox was traditionally used by Yukon First Nations for robes and linings. Foxes were trapped with snares and deadfalls, and were hunted with bows and arrows. The carcass of the fox was treated with respect.

The Red Fox was the first furbearer to be raised in captivity for pelt production. In Yukon, fur farming reached its peak in the late 1920's and early 1930's. Yukon fox fur was known worldwide for its superior quality and was in high demand in Europe and the United States. Fur farms were set up in hopes of breeding large numbers of the highly sought after silver fox, but a change in European fashions and import quotas resulted in a declining market, and this once lucrative business met its end.

## VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES

The highway traveller has a good chance of spotting a Red Fox either crossing the road or skirting a nearby clearing. Foxes are more easily seen in winter when they contrast with the snow, but any movement is noticeable against the backdrop of a still forest, so summer sightings are also likely.

The optimum season for viewing Red Fox is in the spring, when the south facing slopes of hills and knolls are bare of snow, and foxes are concentrated near their dens. Dens are more obvious at this time of year because of the increased activity as the pups begin to venture forth and forage nearby. After the pups move out, they (and the dens) are more difficult to locate.

Since foxes have sensitive noses and keen eyesight, the determined viewer would be wise to remain relatively still, at a good distance from the den, in a downwind direction. Occupied dens should not be approached too closely as a disturbed vixen may abandon the pups or move them to another den. Binoculars will give you a clearer view of the foxes without encroaching on their privacy.