



Red Fox

Vulpes vulpes



The red fox (Vulpes vulpes) is not native to Vermont, it was introduced by European colonists. The native fox species, the gray fox, proved too elusive, so early European settlers brought the red fox to use for fox hunting. Red foxes, however, are native to other parts of North America. In comparison, the red fox is slightly larger than the gray fox and it occupies a wider range of habitats. Hunted and trapped for its coat, it's a popular furbearer.

Vermont Wildlife Fact Sheet

Physical Description

The red fox is the size of a small dog and belongs to the same family, the canids. An adult red fox may weigh between eight and fifteen pounds and is approximately 39 to 43 inches in length. It has long pointed black tipped ears, black cheek patches, black "leg stockings" and a long, bushy, white tipped tail.

There are several color phases of the red fox, ranging from black to yellow. Commonly seen as a deep reddish brown, the coat of the red fox also can be black while in its black phase, silver during its silver phase, and red brown with a black stripe down its back and across its shoulders during the cross phase. It may also be grayish color and can often mistaken for the gray fox. However, the black booties on all four of the red fox's legs and its white tipped tail are excellent field markings that distinguish it from the gray fox.

Life Cycle

The breeding season of the red fox varies with latitude within its geographic range.

In Vermont, it commonly breeds late January through February. The males will exhibit signs of aggression during the breeding season, fighting other males for establishment of territories and vying for the female's attention. Females often mate with more than one male but will form a partnership with only one. In preparation of the birth, the female remains in or near the den. The male red fox assists the female by providing her with food.

After a gestation period of 49 to 53 days, the litter is born, ranging in size from one to 13 pups with five as the average. At birth, the pups weigh only about 100 grams, are blind and completely dependent on their mother for survival. Nine to 14 days after birth, their eyes begin to open, and after five weeks, they explore outside of the den. By the time they are ten-weeks old, they are weaned off their mother's milk and are capable of obtaining food for themselves. The mother and pups stay together until the young reach sexual maturity at

about ten months. The red fox breeds once a year.

Food Items

The red fox is an omnivore, feeding on small mammals, birds, woodchucks, insects, eggs, carrion (dead animals) and also fruits and berries. It can be a nuisance because it will occasionally prey on domestic cats, poultry, lambs, young pigs and young goats.

The red fox primarily feeds on rodents. It can often be seen standing still in a field, listening for any movement. When it detects food, it will leap high in the air and pounce on top of the rodent. It also caches surplus food that it can relocate with its excellent memory. The red fox has an excellent memory for locating its stored food provisions.

Habits & Habitat

The red fox utilizes a wide variety of habitats. It prefers a mixture of forest and open areas

and heavily uses the transition areas (called edge) between them. It also requires a suitable den site, which may be one it has dug or an existing burrow of another animal, possibly a woodchuck's that can be reused. Dens can be used year after year and often are connected to resting and feeding grounds by a system of pathways.

The red fox is crepuscular, meaning it is most active at dusk and dawn, but will forage during the daytime as well. The male and female remain together during the year to help raise the young. Unlike the wolf, the red fox does not form packs.

Abundance

The red fox is fairly common throughout its range and is abundant in its preferred habitat in Vermont. Its population can experience dramatic declines in number when hit by diseases, such as rabies, but has can recover quickly.

History

Humans have long labeled the red fox as a pest species. In addition to their natural diet of small mammals and birds, they will occasionally prey upon domestic species, such as poultry. Bounties were once placed on the red fox, however, this proved to be unsuccessful in managing fox numbers. Today, many farmers, have come to recognize the valuable role this species plays in controlling rodent populations that may otherwise grow to a damaging size.

Resource Utilization

The red fox is an important furbearer its range of coat colors delivers varying prices per pelt. With its long-haired pelt, its popularity in the fur industry has increased and so too has its value. Additionally, the fox can also regulate small mammal populations that may cause damage if their numbers grew to be too large.

Management Efforts

The red fox population is monitored closely to regulate hunting and trapping limits. It is protected from over hunting with the season only lasting two months, from the end of October through the end of December. This time of year is chosen to protect against mothers or newborns being harvested.

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