

Red fox

Vulpes vulpes

By Lee Lamb



The first time I saw a red fox was in 1996 when I lived on the west side of Butte, where I often jogged along an abandoned railroad bed that snaked its way out of town. One summer evening I saw a flash of fur vanish in front of me into the sagebrush beside the path. I stopped and peered over the bank, hoping to catch another glimpse, but no luck.

I continued on to my turnaround spot and then headed back, rounded a corner, and stopped short: Up ahead and 30 feet below the point on the path where I'd seen the furry flash sat an adult red fox and two kits at a den entrance. The trio frolicked for several minutes before retreating into their den. I didn't see the foxes again but heard them yipping and barking on occasion down near the den area. Come fall, they were gone.

IDENTIFICATION AND ECOLOGY

Meriwether Lewis described the red fox in his journals as “the most beautiful fox in the world.” With its rufous-colored coat, black “socks,” and bushy, white-tipped tail, the red fox is certainly the most distinctive of Montana’s canid species. Color variants do occur in the wild—the “silver fox” is black with white-tipped guard hairs, and the “cross fox” has a cross of brown hairs extending over its shoulders and down its midline—but all share the signature white tip on the tail.

Averaging 11 pounds and 42 inches from nose to tail tip, red foxes resemble a small dog in size. They communicate by bark, growl, and yip rather than by howl, and are primarily nocturnal. Red foxes live in a variety of habitats throughout Montana, but prefer riparian

areas and forest edges, and may den in disturbed areas near human habitation.

DENNING AND REPRODUCTION

Red foxes den only during the breeding season. Vixens, or females, prepare a den site or sites, either digging one on their own or squatting in an unoccupied site. Dens are typically located on a hillside with a good view of the surrounding area or under a haystack or abandoned building. Most measure a few meters long and include a grass-lined chamber for the pups and more chambers for storing food.

Breeding occurs during January and February, producing one litter of four to six pups in March or April. Males (known as dogs) and females work cooperatively to raise their

SCIENTIFIC NAME *Vulpes* is the Latin word for “fox” and “cunning.”

young. Males are the sole provider for the homebound nursing female, but upon weaning both parents bring solid food to the pups until they are ready to tag along with their parents on nightly hunts. Adults may move pups between dens more than once during the first couple of months. Pups leave the den in the fall and are sexually mature their first winter.

DIET AND FORAGING BEHAVIOR

Red foxes hunt by scent and hearing, preferring rabbits and hares but also feasting on small mammals, birds, eggs, insects, and some plants. Stealthy and smart, they catch prey by sneaking up and pouncing rather than by chasing.

Red foxes are known to hunt cooperatively to flush out prey from patches of vegetation or from culverts. The handsome predators are most active at twilight or at night, but they may hunt during daylight hours in winter and in the spring while rearing pups.

STATUS AND MANAGEMENT

Red foxes are widely distributed and abundant throughout Montana from dense forests to open grasslands to city parks. While many wildlife species have struggled and even declined with the growth of rural and suburban development, red foxes have adapted and taken advantage of human-altered habitats.

Though a few hundred red foxes are trapped in Montana each year for their lush fur, the activity has no effect on the state’s overall population. 🦊



Silver phase red fox

Writer Lee Lamb lives in Missoula.