

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

RED FOX

Vulpes vulpes



Habitat: A mixture of forest and open fields, with the transition zone or "edge" between these habitats particularly favored. Suburban and urban areas are commonly inhabited by red foxes.

Weight: Ranges from 8 to 15 pounds, 10 to 11 pounds is average. Males are slightly heavier than females.

Length: 39 to 43 inches. Males are generally larger than females.

Food: Mice, voles, woodchucks, rabbits, chipmunks, fruits, insects, birds and eggs, carrion, garbage, amphibians, and reptiles.

Identification: Red foxes have an elongated snout, pointed ears and a long, bushy tail which is carried horizontally. It has an orange-red coat with black feet, a white-tipped tail, white underside, and the back of the ears are black. Other color phases are uncommon but include silver, black and a cross, always with a white-tipped tail and dark feet.

Range: The red fox occurs over most of North America from Baffin Island, Canada, and Alaska to the southern United States, except for coastal western Canada, Oregon and California, the great plains, the southwestern desert and the extreme southeastern United States.

Reproduction: Foxes breed from January through March and, after an average gestation period of 51 to 53 days, give birth to a litter averaging four or five pups. The red fox may dig its own burrow but usually improves an abandoned woodchuck burrow. Most foxes have more than one den and will readily move their young if disturbed. The pups stay in the den until about four to five weeks of age, after which they emerge and begin to play outside the den entrance. Both adults care for the young by bringing food and guarding the den site. At

about 12 weeks, the pups are weaned and join the adults on hunting forays, learning to catch food on their own. In the fall, the young disperse from the family unit and will usually breed during their first winter at about one year old.

History in Connecticut: In the early 1700s, indigenous red foxes were inhabitants of mixed forest and open areas while the native gray fox inhabited more dense woodlands. In the 1750s, the European red fox was introduced into the eastern coastal areas of the United States and likely interbred with the native red fox to produce a hybrid (mix) of both types of fox. The hybrid fox is now considered to be the only red fox type in Connecticut.

Interesting Facts: Red fox are sighted frequently because they prefer open habitats and are not strictly nocturnal; it is not unusual to see a red fox during the daytime.

The red fox may partially bury, or cache, excess food covering it with soil, grass, leaves, or snow and mark it with urine.

In Connecticut, the normal home range for a fox is about two to four square miles, but it may vary depending on the abundance of food.

The voice of the red fox varies from a short, sharp yap or bark, followed by a "yap, yap," to a combination of screeches, yells, and long howls.

Hunting and trapping can regulate fox populations while providing recreational opportunities for hunters and trappers. Nationally, millions of dollars are generated annually from fox pelt harvests; the silky, dense fur of the red fox is more valued than the fur of the gray fox, which is coarse and thin. In addition to their value as a furbearer, foxes are important predators of prolific prey species like mice and rabbits.

In Connecticut, disease and roadkills are important mortality factors. Adult foxes have few predators; coyotes likely will not tolerate foxes within their territories. Several studies have found that red foxes only occur in the gaps between the larger territories of coyotes. The relatively recent expansion of coyotes throughout Connecticut may have displaced red foxes from much of their prime habitat.

Management of Fox Problems: Problems associated with foxes include depredation on domestic animals, perceptions of danger to humans (healthy foxes pose virtually no danger to humans), and their potential to carry disease organisms. Foxes will prey on small livestock such as ducks, chickens, rabbits, and young lambs, but generally do not bother larger livestock. Cats may also be preyed on. Foxes often carry their prey to a secluded area or their den where it is eaten by the adults and young.

Livestock can be protected from foxes by secure pens, coops, or fencing. Most predation occurs at night so it is particularly important to provide protection at that time. Foxes will dig or squeeze under poorly maintained fences and may climb over small fences. Some electric fence designs can provide good protection. Outdoor dogs may also keep foxes away. Potential food sources, such as pet food, meat scraps on compost piles, and fruit below fruit trees should be eliminated. Dead livestock should be properly disposed. Removing foxes through trapping or shooting is only recommended during designated seasons or in situations where individual foxes show a pattern of preying on livestock.

Many of the methods used to protect livestock can also be used to protect pets. Pets are often easier to protect

because they can be kept indoors at night and can be supervised while outdoors by their owners. Human presence is often a deterrent to foxes. Foxes that travel into residential yards should be harassed or scared with loud noises to prevent them from becoming habituated. During the spring, disturbing a den site physically or with unnatural odors such as moth balls, may prompt foxes to move to an attractive den which may be farther from yards and houses.

Foxes, especially red foxes, commonly live in close association with human residences and communities. They frequently inhabit yards, parks, and golf courses, especially areas that adjoin suitable, undeveloped habitat. Healthy foxes pose virtually no danger to humans. Foxes can grow accustomed to human activity but are seldom aggressive toward people. Expanding housing development, particularly in historically rural areas, increases the chances of interactions between humans and foxes, as well as other wildlife. Many homeowners do not realize that their lawn may be a more attractive habitat to foxes than surrounding mature forest. Eliminating healthy foxes is not warranted based solely on human safety concerns. People uncomfortable with the presence of foxes should remove attractants, exclude foxes with fencing and employ scaring techniques. Trapping and relocating foxes is not recommended because the state's fox population and fox "problems" are widespread and relocated foxes can cause problems in new locations. In many cases, homeowner's perceptions of problems are unfounded and in some cases, the mere presence of a fox is perceived as a problem.

Foxes can carry the organisms responsible for several contagious diseases such as mange, distemper, and rabies. The raccoon rabies strain is the only terrestrial strain of rabies in Connecticut. Raccoons are the primary carrier but foxes can also be infected. Foxes are the primary carrier for different strains of rabies that occur in other geographic regions. Animals that appear sick or that are acting abnormally should be avoided. The following symptoms may indicate the presence of rabies or other neurological diseases in mammals: unprovoked aggression, impaired movement, paralysis or lack of coordination, unusually friendly behavior and disorientation. Local animal control officers, police, or the Department of Environmental Protection should be contacted if assistance is needed with a diseased animal.



The Technical Assistance Informational Series is 75 percent funded by Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration—the Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Program. The P-R Program provides funding through an excise tax on the sale of sporting firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment. The remaining 25 percent of the funding is matched by the Connecticut Wildlife Division.