

Species Fact Sheet: Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)



info@themammalsociety.org
www.mammal.org.uk
023 8023 7874

Quick Facts

Recognition: Reddish orange fur, small dog sized; thick bushy tail in winter.

Size: Average male 67-72cm; 62-67cm for females; tail about 40cm

Weight: Average 6-7kg for males; 5-6kg for females.

Life Span: Although they have been recorded up to nine years old in the wild, most survive only one or two years.



Distribution & Habitat

A highly adaptable species, found across Britain, but absent from Scottish Islands (except Skye), in all habitats from salt marshes and sand dunes to the tops of mountains. In Britain, more so than elsewhere in Europe, foxes have also adapted to life in urban surroundings.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Foxes hold territories, the size of which depends on habitat; they can be as small as 0.2 square kilometres in urban areas or up to 40 square kilometres in hill country. Each territory is occupied by a fox family group. These often consist of a pair (dog fox and vixen) and their cubs. However, in areas where foxes are not persecuted and where there is a plentiful supply of food, a family group may contain several adults.

Diet and Feeding

Foxes have a very wide and varied diet. On salt marshes they eat crabs and dead seabirds, while in upland regions carrion may be important, particularly during the winter months. In lowland rural areas small mammals, especially field voles and rabbits, are the major source of food, with earthworms, beetles, fruit (particularly blackberries) and small birds also being eaten. Urban foxes glean large amounts of food, much of this deliberately supplied by local householders. This is supplemented by scavenging from dustbins, bird tables and compost heaps. Those living in some urban areas eat many small birds and feral pigeons.

Reproduction

Usually only one vixen in a group produces cubs, once a year in the spring. Litters average four to five cubs which are born blind and deaf in a den (called an earth). The earth may be dug by the foxes, or they may enlarge a rabbit burrow or use holes made by other animals. In urban areas, cubs are often born under garden sheds. A vixen stays in the earth with her cubs for the first two weeks of their lives. At about four weeks old, usually in late April or early May, cubs begin to come into the open.

Conservation Status

Foxes have little legal protection. In some areas they are subjected to much persecution including shooting, being snared and dug out with terriers and caught with lurchers (fast, long-legged dogs). Self-locking snares and gin traps, both of which were once used to catch foxes, have been outlawed, and hunting with dogs became illegal in 2002. Free running snares are legal, but they must be inspected at least once a day. These humanitarian provisions are the sole protection received by foxes.

Despite their lack of protection foxes are widespread and abundant. The success of the fox is due to its adaptability and it is in no need of active conservation measures. There were about 190 fox hunts in England and Wales in 2002, but these probably killed a small proportion of foxes compared to those captured in snares or shot. Road casualties probably make up 50% of the mortality.

