



## THE RED FOX

***Vulpes Vulpes*, a member of the dog family, Canidae**

A remarkable native mammal, whose depiction in children's books, folklore and media have fostered their fearsome reputation, the fox still divides opinion. They have also become much more common in urban areas, due to their incredible versatility and ability to adapt to widely variable habitats.

Our native Red Fox is the largest of the fox species with males weighing up to 18lbs. Like dogs, they have a long muzzle, slim legs and four-toed pads with 5 claws on their front feet and 4 on their hind feet. Their resplendent, bushy tail makes up to 40 % of their length, and varies in thickness depending on the season and their overall health.

Males have a broader muzzle and are slightly larger than females, but it can be hard to distinguish them at distance.

Although related to dogs, foxes also display behaviour similar to cats. They hunt with feline stealth, stalking and pouncing on prey; even catching fish from a pond with a front paw. They are also excellent climbers, and sit and sleep with their magnificent tail curled round them for warmth.

Their lustrous coat is in peak condition during our winter months, and the variations in coat colour are called morphs. They have a fine, grey underfur that provides insulation, and longer top coat guard hairs which contain the melanin pigmentation that gives the pelt its glorious rufous colours.

Vixens come into oestrous – with ovulation triggered by shortening daylight - in winter, for up to 3 weeks, but are only receptive to mating for about 3 days a year. Peak mating season is January, which is when we hear the distinctive scream of the vixen, advertising her presence to the male. He is super attentive during this time, known as mate-guarding, and he follows her day and night, awaiting her receptiveness. During these 3 brief days, she scent marks all over her territory, and mating is a noisy ritual of wailing, shrieks and chattering sounds. Foxes remain as a resident pair within their permanent territory, breeding every season together, and have strong lifelong bonds.

Part of the common dislike of foxes is our inappropriate tendency to impose human feelings onto a wild animal. It is understandably upsetting if all our garden chickens are killed by a fox, but the instinct of a wild animal is to take prey at every opportunity, then store it for later. So, keeping chickens in an artificially small, confined area means they need to be properly protected.

**Foxes have a hugely varied diet, including rabbits, rodents, earthworms, eggs, fruits and carrion in what is known as optimal foraging – changing their diet to ensure they get the best energy reward for the effort used in finding the food. Urban foxes have been with us since the 1930's, mainly due to our housing encroachment on their natural habitats. They may explore bins, but prey mainly on rats, mice and pigeons, doing a great job of urban pest control.**

