

Written by Kerry Everitt

Design and illustrations by Judie Shore

# Fascinating FOXES



Aesop wrote the clever fox outwitting. But did you know that and agile hunters, natural. Read on to find out more about these secretive but remarkable animals.

many fables about other animals in the forest. foxes are also resourceful pest controllers and even acrobats!

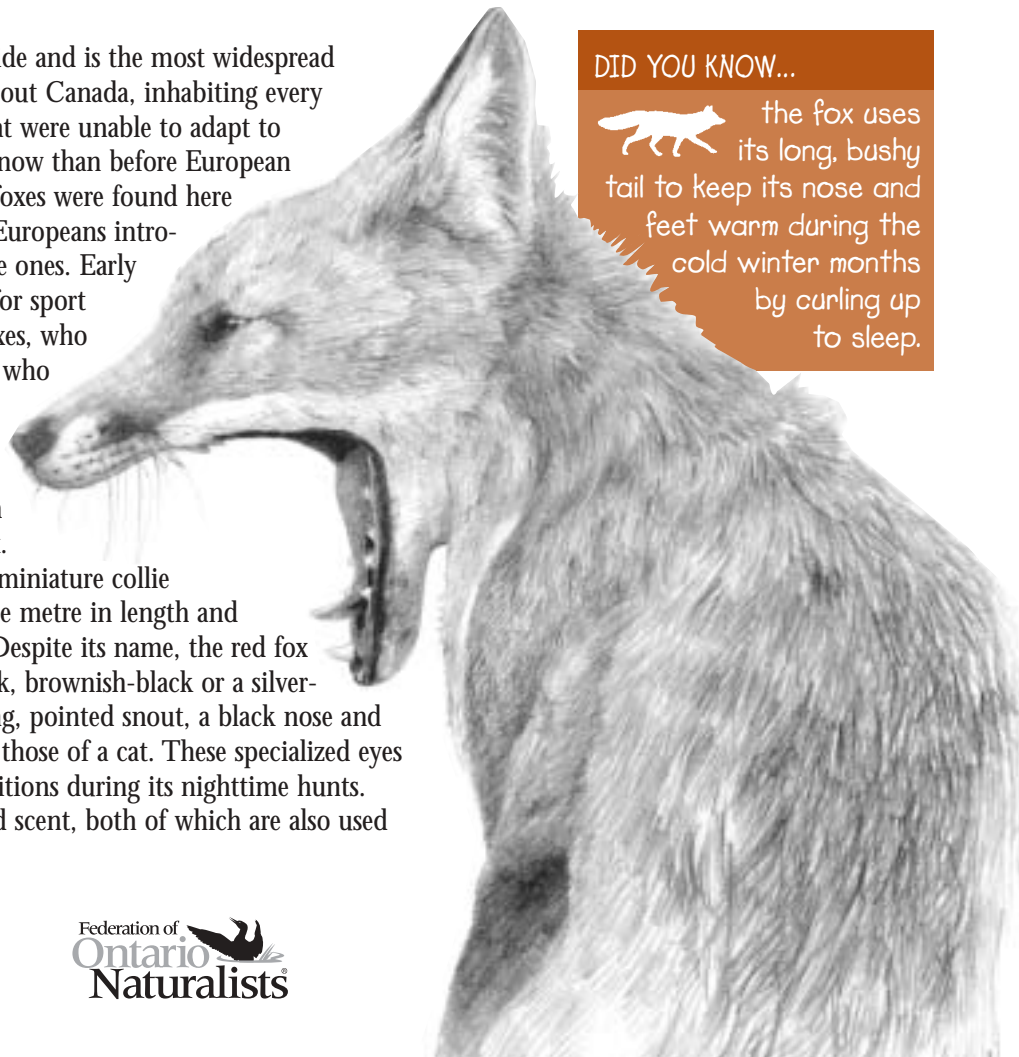
**THE RED FOX** is found worldwide and is the most widespread carnivore on the planet. It is found throughout Canada, inhabiting every province and territory. Unlike mammals that were unable to adapt to humans, there are probably more red foxes now than before European settlement. We don't know how many red foxes were found here or where they were found for sure because Europeans introduced red foxes who then mixed with native ones. Early settlers wanted to ensure enough red foxes for sport hunting and were not satisfied with grey foxes, who would climb trees, unlike their red cousins, who would give chase. Also, in making their farms and homes, settlers cleared dense forests, providing ideal fox habitat. As well, many pioneers killed wolves, which are one of the main predators of the red fox.

The red fox is about the size of a terrier, miniature collie or other small dog. It is usually less than one metre in length and weighs between four and seven kilograms. Despite its name, the red fox may be not only red in colour but also black, brownish-black or a silver-grey. This animal has a characteristically long, pointed snout, a black nose and pointed ears. Their slit-like pupils resemble those of a cat. These specialized eyes allow the fox to make use of low light conditions during its nighttime hunts. The fox also has a keen sense of hearing and scent, both of which are also used for hunting prey.

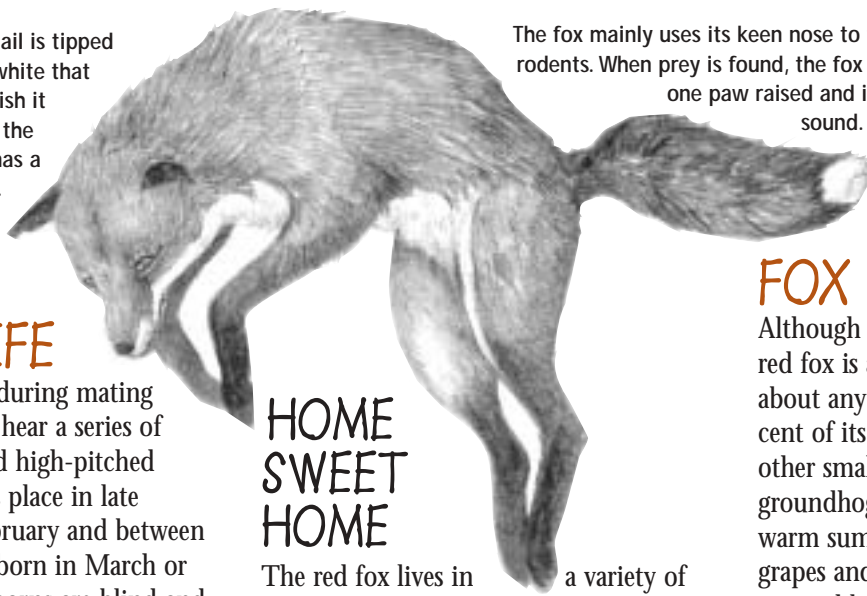
## DID YOU KNOW...



the fox uses its long, bushy tail to keep its nose and feet warm during the cold winter months by curling up to sleep.



The fox's bushy tail is tipped with a touch of white that helps to distinguish it from its relative, the grey fox, which has a black-tipped tail.



The fox mainly uses its keen nose to track mice and other small rodents. When prey is found, the fox will stand motionless with one paw raised and its ears turned towards the sound. It then springs into the air and lands with its front paws on the prey, much like a coyote.

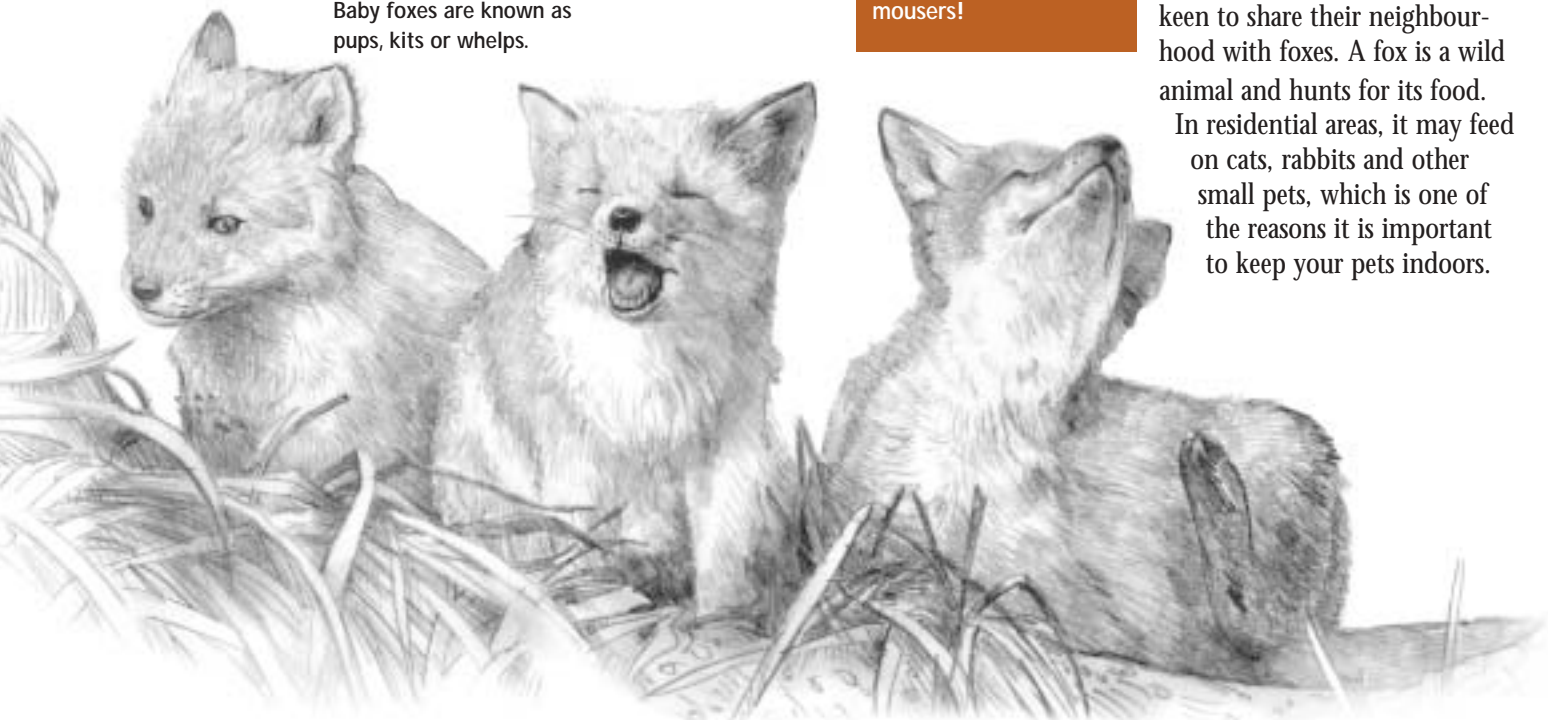
## FAMILY LIFE

Foxes are most vocal during mating season when you can hear a series of whines, yaps, yips and high-pitched howls. Breeding takes place in late January and early February and between one and 14 pups are born in March or April. The furry newborns are blind and deaf and weigh less than a large bag of potato chips! Both the male and female are involved in raising their active litter by teaching them to stalk prey and hunt. The pups grow quickly and are ready to head out on their own by the fall.

The average lifespan for wild foxes is five to six years in northern Ontario and about three years in southern Ontario. Can you think of any reasons why foxes living in the southern parts of the province may not live as long as those in the north? (Answers are at the bottom of page 4.)

A group of foxes is known as a leash or skulk.

Baby foxes are known as pups, kits or whelps.



## HOME SWEET HOME

The red fox lives in a variety of habitats but prefers open fields with running water nearby and a forest close at hand. Ravines and park-like valleys along rivers in cities have provided an ideal habitat for the red fox.

Foxes will dig dens along hedgerows, in dense patches of brush or under the roots of trees. Each den is approximately eight metres in length and usually has two or more escape routes. The sleeping area is lined with dry grass and leaves, providing a warm and comfortable bed for newborn pups.

In many ways, the red fox is much like your pet cat. Both sneak along low to the ground when hunting and then pounce on their prey. Each twitches its tail just before making the attack. Like a cat, the red fox places its back foot in the same footprint made by its front foot. Both the red fox and the cat are efficient hunters and master mousers!

## FOX FOOD

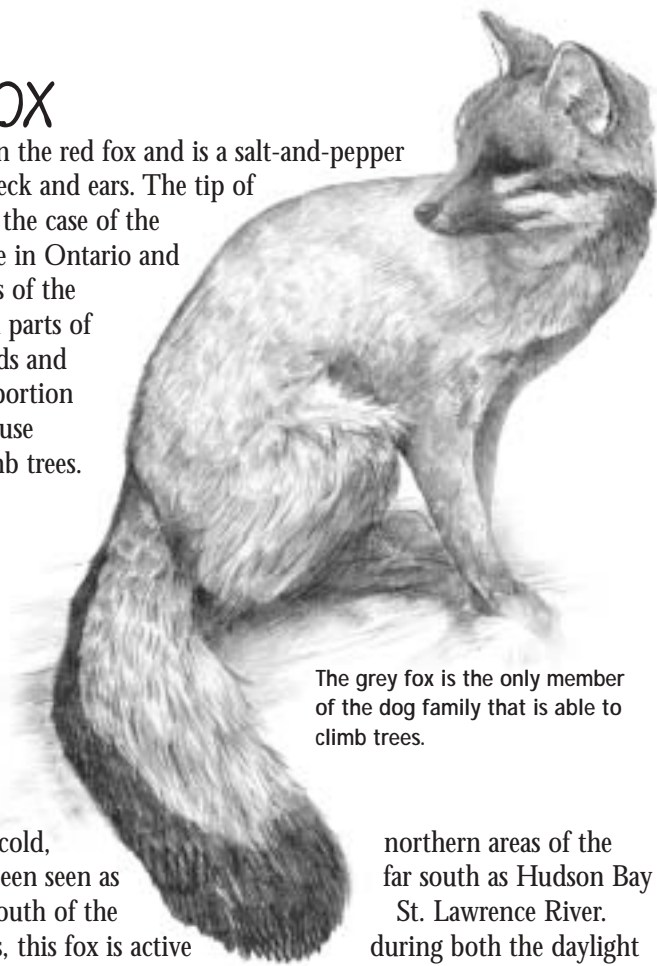
Although a carnivore (meat eater), the red fox is an opportunist and will eat just about anything it can find. About 90 per cent of its diet is made up of mice and other small creatures such as rabbits, groundhogs and muskrats. During the warm summer and early fall, apples, grapes and blueberries are special treats enjoyed by many foxes. In the spring, the fox will hunt for insects, eggs and baby birds. When food is not as easy to come by, the fox will eat carrion — the remains of animals killed by creatures such as wolves and coyotes.

Some farmers used to trap and kill foxes because they would occasionally raid chicken coops and kill some of the livestock. The farmers quickly realized, however, that killing the foxes resulted in an increase in rodents that ate the grain meant for the chickens and geese. Foxes are natural pest controllers — eating between five and 40 mice per day — and are a welcome addition to many farms today. In urban areas, however, some people are not as keen to share their neighbourhood with foxes. A fox is a wild animal and hunts for its food.

In residential areas, it may feed on cats, rabbits and other small pets, which is one of the reasons it is important to keep your pets indoors.

# THE GREY FOX

The grey fox is smaller than the red fox and is a salt-and-pepper colour with reddish legs, neck and ears. The tip of its tail is never white, as in the case of the red fox. The grey fox is rare in Ontario and is found only in small areas of the northwestern and southern parts of the province. Squirrels, birds and bird eggs make up a large portion of this mammal's diet because of its unique ability to climb trees.



The grey fox is the only member of the dog family that is able to climb trees.

# THE ARCTIC FOX

The Arctic fox lives in the cold, Canadian tundra but has been seen and, occasionally, at the mouth of the Hudson Bay. Unlike its southern cousins, this fox is active during both the daylight hours of the summer and the darkness of the winter months. It usually lives in a temporary den when the weather gets stormy and bitterly cold. Despite the icy temperatures, this mammal is an excellent swimmer — burr!

northern areas of the far south as Hudson Bay St. Lawrence River.

Much like other foxes, the Arctic fox mainly eats small rodents such as lemmings and field voles. Carrion is an important source of food for these mammals, and they can often be seen following polar bears in hopes of a free meal.

One of the smallest of the wild dogs in Canada, it is only the size of a large domestic cat. The Arctic fox has very thick fur with air pockets that help to insulate it from the freezing winter temperatures. To help keep its feet toasty warm, it has thick, coarse hair covering its paws. It has short legs and small ears and a long, bushy tail (which makes up about one-third of its total body length).

## DID YOU KNOW...

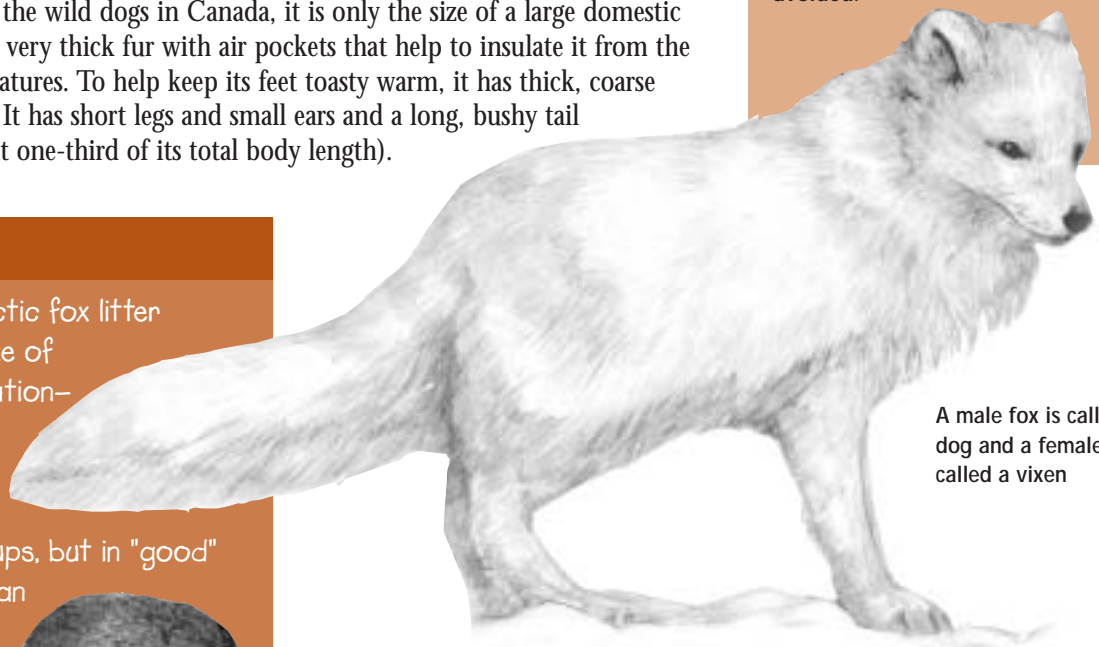
the size of the Arctic fox litter varies with the size of the lemming population—the more lemmings, the larger the litter. The average litter size is six pups, but in "good" lemming years, it can balloon up to 25 pups!

lemming



# FOXES IN DANGER

Even though the fox is a carnivore, it too has enemies. Coyotes, hawks, owls and dogs are all natural predators of the fox. Luckily a fox can run short distances at speeds up to 42 km/h and has also been known to swim to escape danger. Hunting, trapping, road accidents and rabies also claim the lives of countless foxes each year. Vaccines for rabies are distributed in bait throughout many parts of Ontario in the hope of reducing the incidence of this disease. People have the misconception that any fox out during the day must have rabies, and often these animals are wrongly killed. It is not unusual for a fox to be seen in the daylight. Although they are generally nocturnal, if they have a large litter of pups to feed, hunting may also occur during the day. Foxes also enjoy sunning themselves in the warm rays, much in the same way a pet cat does. A fox that is outside in the day and stands still for long periods of time, or is staggering, falling down, or aggressive when unprovoked, attacks inanimate objects or drools excessively may be infected with the rabies virus and should be avoided.



A male fox is called a dog and a female is called a vixen

The Arctic fox is the only member of the dog family that is camouflaged. It changes its coat from beige-brown in summer to white in the winter to help it blend with its surroundings. Because of this, it is sometimes called the white fox.



# Hidden Message Word Search

Find each of the hidden words in the puzzle below.  
Print each leftover word in the space provided to spell out a phrase describing foxes.

- |             |             |          |
|-------------|-------------|----------|
| ARCTIC      | HEDGEROWS   | POUNCE   |
| BLUEBERRIES | HOWLS       | PREDATOR |
| CAMOUFLAGE  | HUNTING     | RABIES   |
| CANID       | INSULATE    | RAVINE   |
| CARNIVORE   | KITS        | RED      |
| CARRION     | LEMMINGS    | SHY      |
| CLIMB       | LITTERS     | SKULK    |
| DENS        | MICE        | SNOUT    |
| GREY        | NOCTURNAL   | VALLEYS  |
| HABITATS    | OPPORTUNIST | VIXEN    |



```

E F S D O C X C S E S S Y A P
G T E E L R A E E T C E L S R
N R A I I R N S I A R I K S E
I E M L R B G K R G T U N E D
T B X I U N A N R T L O G Y A
N A O I I S I R E K U A T H T
U N U M V V N R B T L R E S O
H S M A O A S I E F G I L E R
H E U R T S I N U T R O P P O
L N E C T E E O L P O U N C E
M D R T N S M I B S N E D N O
I I P I E A N O C T U R N A L
C N V C C N H A B I T A T S F
E A I E S W O R E G D E H L D
R C S S Y E L L A V S L W O H
    
```

-----

-----

## DID YOU KNOW...



Foxes have received a bad rap. Many children's stories depict foxes as sly, cunning and deceitful. The term "sly as a fox" conjures up images of wicked creatures, slinking away in the dark of night. Foxes are actually very nervous animals and will skitter away and retreat when frightened. Perhaps a more accurate phrase would be "shy as a fox".

**Question and Answer:** Why do foxes living in the southern parts of the province not live as long as those in the north? Southern Ontario contains more roads and highways, and therefore foxes living in this part of the province have a shorter lifespan.

**Answer to the Hidden Word Search:** Foxes are nature's agile hunters in open fields.

To learn more Fascinating Fox Facts, check out these Web sites:

- [www.schoolnet.ca/vp-pv/mammals/e/list7.html](http://www.schoolnet.ca/vp-pv/mammals/e/list7.html)
- [www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/hww-fap/hww\\_fap.cfm?ID\\_species=72&lang=e](http://www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca/hww-fap/hww_fap.cfm?ID_species=72&lang=e)
- [www.city.mississauga.on.ca/animalservices/html/WLPro/WLProfox.htm](http://www.city.mississauga.on.ca/animalservices/html/WLPro/WLProfox.htm)
- [www.furmanagers.com/furbear/fur008.htm](http://www.furmanagers.com/furbear/fur008.htm)

*Reviewer:* Dan Stuckey, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, *Copy Editor:* Joan Clark, *Editor:* Helen D. Gault  
*Printing:* MPH Graphics Inc.



355 Lesmill Rd, Don Mills, ON  
M3B 2W8 Tel: (416) 444-8419,  
1 800 440-2366 Fax: (416) 444-9866  
E-mail: [info@ontarionature.org](mailto:info@ontarionature.org)

This paper comes from well-managed forests, independently certified in accordance with the rules of the Forest Stewardship Council A.C. Certified by Smartwood SW-COC-319. FSC Trademark© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council A.C.

