



WILDLIFE

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Foxes

Irish name: Madra Rua

French name: Renard

German name: Rotfuchs

Description

Red foxes vary in colour from pale yellow to deep reddish brown, with white or pale underside. The tail is thick, long and bushy, almost always with a white tip. Fox's ears are quite long and pointed.

Body length 50-100cm

Tail length 30- 45cm

Hind Foot 13-16cm

Paw length 5cm

Height at shoulder 30-40cm

Weight 4 – 9 kg

Range & Habitat

After humans, foxes are one of the most widespread of animals on earth. They can live in deep forest, arctic tundra, open grassland or city streets, but they prefer areas of highly variable vegetation. Their favourite place to live is in or near scrub, woodland or other tall vegetation. In cities, urban foxes prefer areas of detached or semi-detached housing with large gardens.

A Fox's Home

Foxes live underground in 'dens' or 'earths'. These are just like rabbit holes only bigger. In fact, sometimes a den is made from an old rabbit hole or a badger's set.

Foxes usually have a number of dens within their territory. Outside of the breeding season, they may spend much of their time above ground in thick cover. During the breeding season the vixen selects a den in which to have her cubs, once born the cubs may be moved from den to den if disturbed. Many dens have only one or two entrances whereas breeding dens may have several entrances.

In urban areas foxes live at higher densities than in the countryside. This is probably due to urban foxes having a more regular source of food... thanks to us! In Dublin fox densities average around 1.04 fox families per km². In rural areas densities may be several times lower than this.

How to recognise a den...

Fox dens are often concealed in thick undergrowth and can be hard to locate, unlike badger setts, which are more conspicuous. Often all that is seen of the dens are runs through the undergrowth made by foxes travelling to and from the den.



In urban areas dens are usually located in dense undergrowth or neglected gardens. Often urban dens may be located under sheds or other man-made features and occasionally they are located under or even inside houses! Fox den locations in Dublin have included: gardens, sheds, compost heaps, a church basement, a utility room of a private house (amongst the laundry!) and in a scrap car in a junkyard!

How to tell if a den is in use...

- ***Stick your head a little into the entrance hole and have a good smell! If you get a sharp acrid 'carnivore' smell then the den has foxes in it.***
- ***Look for food remains like bones and feathers spread out around the entrance. This could mean that there are young in the den.***
- ***In good weather foxes like to do a bit of sunbathing outside the den. Look for signs of trampled grass near the entrance.***
- The droppings, urine and food remains left by foxes make for very fertile soil. As a result, lots of plants will be growing nearby, especially in spring, maybe even some unusual ones that need very rich soil.
- ***In urban gardens fox cubs often make their presence known through collecting toys, boots and other bric-a-brac, demolishing flowerbeds and rooting up lawns.***

Family Life

A home range is typically occupied by a breeding male, a breeding female and their cubs. Often a second non-breeding

female (the offspring of a previous year) will remain in the territory and help to rear the cubs. Very occasionally two females may rear cubs in the same territory or even in the same den.

Males fight to defend their territory during the mating season in January and February. A female fox, a vixen, is pregnant for 53 days and has a single litter per year. Cubs are born in March/April and the average litter is of 4-6 cubs. The tiny fox cubs only weigh 50-150 grams at birth and are not able to open their eyes till they are at least 9-14 days old. At 4-5 weeks of age they are finally able to leave the den but still need their mother to look after them until they are weaned at 8-10 weeks. During this time the vixen may choose to move her cubs several times to different dens for safety.

The fox family stay together until the autumn, by which time the cubs are adult sized. At this time the young will disperse from the parents range to find their own territory. Young males will move up to 40km away and young females up to 10km. Once the young have established a new territory they will stay there for life.

The fox cubs will be mature enough by the following mating season to start their own families. In captivity, foxes can live for up to 12 years, but in the wild, with dangers like traffic, hunting and fights between males, foxes typically only live for 3 or 4 years.

Feeding habits

Foxes are nocturnal creatures – that is, they are most active at night. If undisturbed, they may be seen during the day as well. Foxes are omnivores. This means

that they eat other animals as well as plants. Among the fox's favourite foods are rabbits, birds and small rodents, such as rats.

Sometimes the fox gets a bad name from farmers who blame them for killing lambs and poultry. Foxes in fact rarely prey on lamb and it makes up a very small part of their diet. Where lamb or sheep is taken it is most often scavenged from animals that have already died from other causes. Foxes do, however, prey on poultry and will take chickens or other poultry that is not properly fenced in.

Bird's eggs are a real delicacy and very nutritious too, so not surprisingly, foxes will take them whenever they can. A fox will bite into the egg so the whole shell is broken and then lick up the yolk and egg white off the ground. Sometimes if a fox finds an egg but isn't hungry, it will hide it under some moss, as it is too delicate to carry back to the den.

In the summer and autumn, the many different fruits and berries available become a major part of the diet. In particular, cherries and plums, which are eaten whole from the ground.

Evidence of a kill

When a fox eats a mouse or a small bird, there is rarely much sign left of the kill. The prey is usually eaten whole. The only evidence of a kill would be a few tufts of fur, some feathers or a few drops of blood. For bigger kills it can be equally difficult detective work. Depending on how hungry the fox is or how big the kill is, it may decide to bring the kill home to the den, leaving very little trace above ground. More often than not the fox will eat his kill above ground, leaving hints such as droppings or paw



prints. However, the bones of larger animals will be discarded outside the den when the meal is finished, so that would be a good place to look to see what your foxes have been eating.

Some Fox Foods

- | | |
|------------------|----------------|
| <i>Rabbits</i> | <i>Eggs</i> |
| <i>Hares</i> | <i>Insects</i> |
| <i>Rats</i> | <i>Worms</i> |
| <i>Mice</i> | <i>Fruit</i> |
| <i>Hedgehogs</i> | <i>Scraps</i> |
| <i>Birds</i> | |

Tracks

A track is the footprint an animal leaves in the ground. Did you know that foxes have five toes on their front paws but only four on their hind paws? The fifth toe on the front paw is raised up though, so it doesn't actually show in the track. Unlike us the left and right footprint or paw print are almost identical so it can be difficult to tell them apart if you only find one print. It is easier to tell the fore and hind paws apart, as the forepaw is slightly larger than the hind paw.



Fox track



Dog track

When looking for fox tracks, be careful not to confuse them with dog tracks, as they are quite similar. Here is a table to help you tell the difference between them.

Fox Track

Small pads (5cm in width approx.)

Front paws are distanced from the central pad

All the pads are spaced apart

The claw marks are slender and long

A fox's track is more slender and elongated compared with that of a dog

Dog Track

Large pads (size variable)

Front paws are close to the central pad

All the pads are close together

The claw marks are short and rounded

A dog's track is rounder and shorter than that of a fox

Droppings

Fox droppings can be quite easy to recognise, so you'll know if a fox has been about. They are similar to that of a dog but are spirally twisted with a point at one end. The colour can vary between black and grey depending on what the fox has been eating. Berries in autumn give a darker colour whereas animal bones give a paler whitish colour. Fur, feather and bone fragments of small animals can be found in droppings all year round. In the summer, the hard outer skeleton of insects called chitin may be seen. Beetles are a particular favourite.

Because foxes use the distinct smell of their droppings to mark out their territory, droppings will commonly be found in elevated places such as tree stumps, tall grasses or on large rocks.

Communication

Like all other mammals, foxes leave their distinctive smell everywhere they go. Usually this is to mark out their territory for other foxes. The smell includes information as to whether the fox is male or female, and how old and healthy or strong it is. During the mating season foxes get particularly smelly! Scents can say whether a female is pregnant or even if she has young cubs. Scent is a very important form of communication.

Fox talk

Foxes have up to 20 different calls, 8 of which are just used by cubs. Foxes are actually quite quiet in that they will only call about once every five hours. Some of these calls are friendly and can be quite complex, whereas others are aggressive and much simpler. Here is a list of the 8 most commonly heard fox calls.

Barks/ yells: By far the most common calls. These are aggressive calls used to mark out territory.

Shrieks: By vixens to attract dog foxes in winter; long calls starting gradually making it easy to find the caller

Growls: Very like a dog's growl and also used as a threat

High whines: Usually follow barks

Wow-wow barks/ staccato barks: multiple barks (3-6), which can

be heard far away and are used for friendly communication

Ratchet calls: A short burst of sharp c-c-c-c sounds. Ritualised aggressive call.

Yell whines: Signifies intense submission to another fox

Screams: Defensive or threat calls

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