

Wildlife Express!

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The Fantastic Fox!



Photo courtesy Gerald and Buff Corsi
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Let's Talk about the Red Fox

Sly, cunning, sneaky, and clever are words that have been used to describe the red fox. Are these words accurate descriptions of the red fox? Well, red foxes may appear “sneaky” or “clever,” but it may just be humans not understanding their shy and nervous habits.

Red foxes will sometimes crouch low to the ground and walk slowly. They are not trying to be “sly.” They are actually trying to go unnoticed as they look for something to eat. Red foxes may look a bit like a cat when hunting. They move very slowly or stand still listening for a mouse. When they hear the mouse, they suddenly jump up into the air and pounce on the mouse with their front paws. Red foxes have an amazing sense of hearing. They can hear a mouse squeak from 150 feet away. That’s half the length of a football field!

Red foxes eat a lot of small rodents, like mice, but they also eat rabbits, birds, insects, and dead animals. They will even eat fruits and vegetables from people’s gardens. Red foxes are omnivores; they will eat just about anything. This allows them to live in many different places.

Have you ever seen a red fox that was not red-dish-orange in color? The fur of a red fox may be black, silver, brown, white, or a mixture of these colors. You may have heard someone call a red fox a “cross” fox. A “cross” fox is a red fox that has black stripes that run across the shoulders and



down the back in the shape of a cross. Although red foxes come in many different colors, they are still called red foxes.

Red foxes usually live alone or in small family groups. To tell other foxes a home is taken, red foxes mark their territory with urine, poop or scent from scent glands. Red foxes have scent glands on their rear ends, lips, jaws and feet. They also use sounds to communicate with each other. Scientists have recorded 28 different sounds that red foxes make.

Fox kits, or babies, are born in a den. Usually red foxes only use a den to give birth and care for their young. The rest of the year they curl up in a ball and place their tails over their bodies to stay warm. Red foxes have a built-in blanket!

January or February is when kits are born. They weigh about as much as 12 unsharpened pencils. They spend the first four or five weeks in the den being nursed by their mother. The male fox will bring the mother food when she is in the den with the kits. Kits come out of the den and start to explore the world around them at about five weeks of age. This is when they start to learn to hunt by watching their parents. By 12 weeks, they can hunt on their own and leave to find their own place to live.

Keep an eye out for red foxes in Idaho. You are most likely to see them during dawn, dusk or at night. You may even see one in your town or city nervously looking for something to eat.



A stylized illustration of a city skyline in shades of purple and blue, set against a light blue sky. The word "Wild" is written in a large, dark green, bubbly font, and "in the City" is written in a black, sans-serif font to its right.

Wild in the City

When you think of your community do you think of raccoons or deer or foxes? You probably don't. We think of our towns as places we live, not wildlife. People are often quite surprised to see deer in a local park, raccoon tracks in the snow, or a hawk in the backyard. In fact, many wild animals have made our home, their home, too.

Wildlife can live anywhere there is good habitat. Animals can survive as long as they can find food, water, shelter and space. Many of our towns and cities provide good habitat for wildlife. Think about your own community. Do you have a park where you play with your friends?

This is an example of habitat for urban, or city, wildlife. How about your backyard? Backyards with a variety of flowers, trees, and shrubs can provide a small habitat for wildlife. Even something as simple as putting up a bird feeder or bird bath can make your yard an attractive habitat. Does your school have an outdoor classroom or garden? That could be wildlife habitat, too!

Some urban wildlife is very familiar. Do you have squirrels in your community? They are urban wildlife. How about birds? Many birds can easily adapt to living in towns. From tiny humming birds and small songbirds to

great horned owls and Canada geese, birds are all around us. Many kinds of urban wildlife are nocturnal or come out at dawn and dusk. While we sleep, they are busy trying to survive. When morning arrives, they are ready to find shelter and rest. Deer, raccoons, foxes, skunks, and coyotes live among us, but often go unseen. If you are observant, you can find the tracks they leave behind.

While we may see wildlife in town, it is important to remember that urban wildlife is still wild. Enjoy them from a distance, and think about how lucky you are to live in a "wild" community!

The Hungry Fox and the Boastful Suitor

Iroquois Fable

One day Fox was out walking along. He'd been hunting but had no luck. It was a long time since he'd eaten. His stomach was growling so loudly he could hardly hear anything else. Suddenly he realized someone was coming, singing a song. Quicker than the flick of a wren's tail Fox leaped off the path and crouched down on his belly in the bushes. Louder and louder grew the song. Then Fox saw something begin to appear over the crest of the hill. It was a single heron feather. Fox moved his front paws, getting ready to leap out at the bird. But as the feather lifted higher and higher, he realized it was no bird at all. It was the feather attached to the top of a gustoweh, the head-dress of an Iroquois man whose face now bobbed into sight as he came over the hill on horseback.

If he sees me, Fox thought, I can forget about my hunger forever! It was well known that fox skins were prized by the Iroquois. Fox tried to make himself smaller than a mouse, hoping he wouldn't be seen.

Closer and closer the man came. He was wearing fine clothes and Fox could hear the words of man's song very clearly now. It was a boasting song.

"No one is braver than Heron Feather," sang the young man.

"And I should know that for I am he. No one wears finer clothing. No one is a better fisherman. If you doubt this, look and see."

He was on his way to the lodge of a young woman he had been watching for some time. He was going to try to impress her and her mother so that the girl would ask him to marry her. His song and his fine clothing were part of the plan.

But Fox was no longer listening to Heron Feather's song. He was not seeing those fine clothes. All of Fox's attention was on what he smelled - fish. That large bag hanging from the young man's blanket roll was full of fish! Fox's mouth watered and his tongue hung out. It had been such a long time since he had eaten fish. His fears left him. The young man on the horse passed him by, but Fox's thoughts were far ahead.

Yes, Fox said to himself. I think there is a way. As quickly as he could, he ran along through the woods keeping out of sight of the road. Just around a bend, Fox laid himself down by the edge of the path. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth so that his tongue hung out in the dirt. Not moving a muscle, he waited. Soon he began to hear Heron Feather's boasting song.

Heron Feather was so intent on his singing, trying to find a few more words to describe just how fine he looked in his new white buckskin breech-cloth that he almost rode right past Fox. When he saw Fox out of the corner of his eye, he stopped. "Enh," he said, "what is this?" He climbed down from his horse.

"Kweh, a dead fox?" Picking up a long stick he carefully prodded the side of the animal. It did not move. "Nyoh," he said, "it is surely dead." He bent down and looked at it closely. It was skinny, but the pelt was in fine condition. He picked it up by the tail. "Hmm, it has not been dead for long. It only stinks a little bit." When he said that, Fox's mouth opened a little and his lips curled back from his teeth, but Heron Feather did not notice.

"Hmm," Heron Feather said, "maybe I should skin it out now." When he said that one of Fox's eyes twitched a little, but Heron Feather did not notice. "Neh," he went on, "I should not skin him out now. If I do, I may dirty my fine new clothes. I will just take him with me." He walked back to his horse and began to unlace the bag. "Weh-yoh," he smiled, "when Swaying Reed's mother sees this fox I caught she will know I am a great hunter. Then she will surely allow her daughter to bring me marriage bread." He dropped the fox in with his fish, laced the bag shut and climbed back on his horse. Soon he was singing again. This time it was a song about how great a hunter Heron Feather was.

Inside the bag Fox lay still for a few minutes. Then he began to gnaw at the side. When he had made a hole large enough, he began to drop the fish out, one by one. Finally, when all the fish were gone, he made the hole larger and jumped out to freedom and his best meal in many days.

Too busy with his singing, Heron Feather did not even notice. He rode all the way to the village where Swaying Reed lived. He stopped in front of her mother's lodge and sat there on his horse, singing until many people had gathered around. He sang of his beautiful clothes, of the many fish he caught (he actually had traded his mother's beaded moccasins for them), of all the animals he hunted and trapped. Swaying Reed and her mother came out of the lodge and watched as he reached back for his bag. Now he would show them what a good provider he was!

When he held up the bag and saw that it was empty with a hole in the bottom he stopped singing. Turning around, he rode silently away. He learned that day that boasting songs do not make a person great. It is one thing to find a fox and another to skin it.

Be Outside: The Night Sky



Being outside at night gives you the chance to look at the night sky.

Stars, planets, constellations, and the moon are all things to observe at

night. Use a pair of binoculars to look at the craters on the moon or at distant planets. Here are several things to find in the January night sky:

The Moon becomes full on January 9. A moon that is becoming full is called a “waxing” moon. Once the full moon has passed, it is called a “waning” moon. As the moon wanes, it becomes less and less visible until it becomes a New Moon which is not visible in the night sky. Watch the different phases of the moon as it waxes and wanes during the month.

Quadrantid Meteor Shower---This meteor shower is the first meteor shower of the New Year. It was first observed in the 1830s. It occurs between January 1 - 5. It’s supposed to peak on January 3 – 4 with as many as 40 meteors per hour. Look toward the north near

Polaris, the North Star and east toward the Big Dipper (Ursus Major). If you want to observe this meteor shower, you will need to stay up late and find a dark location away from bright lights.

Orion---This is a large rectangular constellation found in the winter night sky. It is also called “The Hunter.” Orion is easily observed by looking for the three stars lined up together that form Orion’s belt. Several stars make up Orion’s shoulders. Betelgeuse

(beetle juice) is the very bright star on the northeast corner of the constellation. It is one of the largest stars in the sky and is 1,000 times bigger than the Sun!



The Dog Family

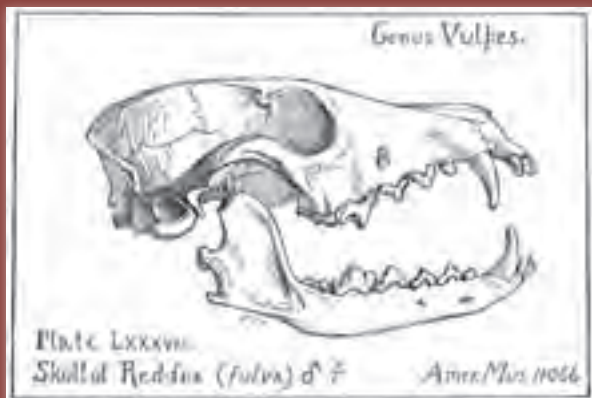
Members of the dog family are called canines. Worldwide there are 34 species, or kinds, of canines. Members of this family include wolves, coyotes, foxes, jackals and African wild dogs. The domestic dogs that we keep as pets first came from wild canines.

What comes to your mind when you think of what a wild dog eats - meat? Wild dogs do eat meat. Mammals, frogs and snakes are on the menu, but they also eat other things. They may eat eggs, insects, nuts, and fruits. Canines that live near people will even eat garbage!

Canines may not be as fast as some of the animals they hunt, but they can often run for a longer time. Dogs have great endurance. They can run for long distances without getting tired. One way they catch prey is to keep the animal running until it gets so tired it can't run any longer. Then the canine can grab the animal around the neck and pull it to the ground. A single animal may not be able to pull large prey to the ground, so wild dogs often hunt in groups. They also are medium-sized. You won't find any wild dogs as small as a Chihuahua!

Wild dogs are found on every continent except one, Antarctica. We have nine species of canines in the United States, and four of those live in Idaho. We have gray wolves, coyotes, red foxes and kit foxes. Kit foxes are rare and only found in the southern part of the state. They are the smallest member of the canine family. They weigh between three and six pounds and are only 18 to 21 inches long! The gray wolf is the largest canine in Idaho. Wolves weigh between 70 and 110 pounds and can be over six feet long. They are huge!

If you see a canine in the wild, you may see it acting like your pet dog or a friend's dog, but remember – it is still a wild animal. Like all wild animals, canines need to be respected and observed from a distance.



Myths, Legends and Fables

Many myths, legends and fables have been created about animals. Maybe it's because animals are so cool! You know about myths, legends and fables, right? They are old stories that are passed down from generation to generation. Many of these stories began before history was written down.

A fable is a story that is told to teach a lesson. Fables are about animals or plants that act and talk like people. The story about how tortoise won the race against the hare is an example of a fable.

Many people use the terms myth and legend in the same way, but they are different. A legend is a made-up story about people and the things they have done. Legends are stories based on facts about historical people. These stories have been blown out of proportion to teach a lesson. The story of Robin Hood is an example of a legend. There really was a man named Robin that lived in Nottinghamshire that helped the poor. Did he live in a forest with a bunch of merry men and rob people? Probably not, but helping people is the message that is remembered.

A myth is a story about nature and how nature works. Myths are designed to teach. They try to answer questions that people have about how the world came to be or why things happen in nature. Native peoples around the world shared myths, and they became part of their culture and beliefs. They became sacred.

Foxes play many roles in Native American stories from different tribes. In some Southwestern tribes and many tribes of Mexico, Fox is a trickster or clown. In some tribes of Northern California, Silver Fox is wise and the creator of Earth and its creatures. The Blackfoot and Apache tribes associate Fox with fire and the sun. There are stories of Fox stealing fire and bringing it to people. In the Northeast, Midwest and Plains tribes, Fox sometimes uses his intelligence to help other animals solve a problem or punish someone careless or arrogant. Read the fox myths in this issue of *Wildlife Express*. What are the stories teaching?

Predators

When you hear the word “predator,” do you think of a large, snarling animal with long claws? The word predator may bring images to your mind of huge teeth dripping with saliva and feelings of fright, but are these images and negative feelings really accurate?

A predator is any animal that kills and eats another animal to survive. This can mean an animal as tiny as a spider or as large as a whale. Predators come in many different sizes and shapes. Red foxes and mountain lions are predators. Trout, ladybugs and robins are predators, too. If an animal eats another animal, then it's a predator.

Being a predator is not as easy as it sounds. Prey animals do not want to be a predator's meal. They have ways to avoid being caught. Prey often have large ears to hear predators sneaking up on them. Many prey can explode away from a predator with great speed. Some even look like rocks or trees. Camouflage is a great way to avoid being eaten by a predator. Predators have to overcome all of a prey animal's tricks to catch the animal. While predators are chasing their dinner, the prey might try to kick, bite, or sting the predator. To top it all off, nine times out of ten, the predator will probably go hungry. Life as a predator is not easy!

The number of predators there are depends upon the number of animals they have to eat. The more rabbits there are, the more bobcats you may see. As soon as rabbit numbers drop, so will the number of bobcats.

Predators are important parts of the ecosystem. They help maintain the balance of nature. Could you imagine how many mice there would be if we didn't have red foxes or hawks to eat them? We might be overrun with mice and other pests eating our crops. Often, predators eat sick and unhealthy animals. Removing unhealthy members from a herd helps to keep the whole herd healthy and strong.

Predators may sometimes be seen as vicious or bloodthirsty, but they really are not. Predators kill for one reason – to survive. Wildlife acts instinctively (in-STINK-tiv-lee) or naturally. They have no choice. Our world would be a different place with no predators.

Why the Fox has a Huge Mouth

An Aztec / Mayan Myth

One day many years ago, at a time when his mouth was still small and dainty, the fox was out walking and happened to notice a bird singing on a hilltop. Fascinated by the bird's flute-like bill, fox said politely, “What a lovely flute, and how well you play it! Could you let me try it? I'll give it back in a moment, I promise.”

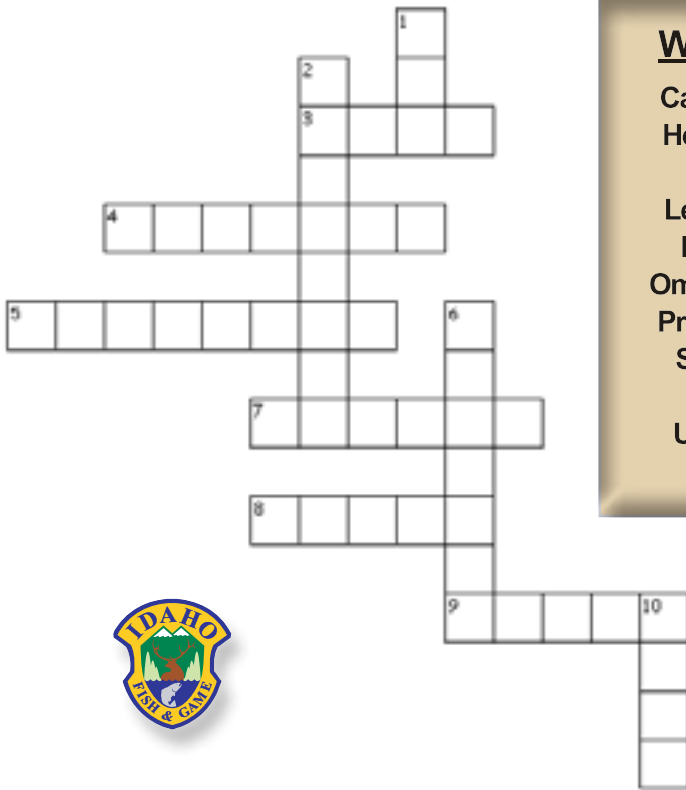
The bird refused. But the fox was so insistent that at last the bird lent him its bill, advising him to sew up his lips except for a tiny opening so that the ‘flute’ would fit just right.

The fox began to play. He played on and on without stopping. After a while the bird asked for its bill back, but still the fox kept on. The bird reminded him, “You promised. Besides, I only use it from time to time; you're playing it constantly.” But the fox paid no attention and kept right on playing.

Awakened by the sound of the flute, skunks came out of their burrows and climbed up the hill in a bustling throng. When they saw the fox playing, they began to dance.

At the sight of the dancing skunks, the fox burst out laughing. As he laughed, his lips became unstitched. His mouth tore open and kept on tearing until he was grinning from ear to ear. Before the fox could regain his composure, the bird picked up his bill and flew away. To this day the fox has a huge mouth as punishment for breaking his promise.

Red Fox Crossword



Words

Canines
Hearing
Kit
Legend
Myth
Omnivore
Predator
Scent
Tail
Urban

Across

3. A story about nature and how nature works.
4. Foxes use this sense to find food.
5. This is an animal that eats other animals to survive.
7. A story based on facts about historical people.
8. Wild animals that live in our communities are called _____ wildlife.
9. Red foxes mark their territories with urine, poop and _____.

Down

1. This is the name given to a baby red fox.
2. An animal that eats both meat and plants.
6. Members of the dog family are called _____.
10. This is a fox's blanket.

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For more information, call or write: *Wildlife Express*, Idaho Department of Fish and Game,
600 South Walnut, PO Box 25, Boise, Idaho, 83707 (208) 287-2890.

Lead Writer: Adare Evans Layout: Sandy Gillette McBride
Contributors: Lori Adams • Vicky Runnoe • Brenda Beckley

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