

The Fox



Foxes have been the subject of fact and fantasy since earliest recorded times. In most every fable, story and account of nature, foxes have been included, either as the protagonist or the antagonist. Stories abound portraying him as sly, crafty and verging on the genius level in mental capabilities. He's been the villain in Peter Rabbit's life as well as the genius in Walt Disney's nature dramas. In reality this little fellow of the dog family has been persistently persecuted by gun hunters, bounty hunters, and fur trappers, as well as hounds and other predators. The fact that he has survived is a tribute to his incredible adaptability.

The fox, more than any other animal except maybe his cousins the coyote or wolf, can, among his real or imaginary talents, stir up more contrary feelings than one would imagine. Game hunters and poultry farmers have just as extreme feelings about his worth as do hunters with hounds or nature lovers. Contradictory as that may sound, organized foxhunting thrives and relishes the ability of the hounds to figure out the puzzle of where he is, then push him in a chase to his earth, as his home is known — not to kill the fox.

Reduced numbers naturally lead to reduced sport. Trophies are not necessary; good hound work is reward enough. What is the fox, but a runner. He earns his living by running and his speed accounts for most of his meals. His diet, although 90 percent mice, relishes an occasional rabbit. Foxes actually enjoy running. They will run all night in front of a pack of hounds, not ending the chase until the first light of day. Organized foxhunters have many times seen a fox in the open sunning himself in order to get a fast break from his pursuers.

Foxes mate in late winter only. After a gestation period of about 51 days, litters of cubs are born. A fox litter numbers between one and 14, and it is not uncommon for vixens to pool their litters. The dogs, or males, help with the meals while the vixens are nursing. Late spring and summer is kindergarten through graduate school for the cubs. The vixens teach them how to survive all the twists and turns of life and how to acquire a full stomach. When the cubs are three-and-a-half to four months old, the "Fall shuffle" begins. As with all wildlife, this is the time when mothers send the young out on their own to make their way. There is no hunting in late spring and summer while this important education is going on for the cubs.



A fox's life is not usually long, although foxhunters do not aid in their demise. Nature is one of their biggest enemies, as are roads, snowmobiles and trappers. Storms, droughts, floods, and fires — as well as diseases, plows and mowers — also shorten their life expectancy. With all these calamities, why do foxes still exist? Mother nature has provided for the specie's survival, although she cares not for one or two. She created the ability of foxes to have an over-production or surplus. Man's intervention can change this. In nature, the surplus protects the breeding stock for the future. According to the pamphlet, "*The Red Foxes of Michigan*," the definitive publication on foxes in North America: "The surplus is born to die — and soon — because there isn't room and food to cover for all of them, and as far as nature is concerned they aren't needed. This surplus is nature's insurance that the species will survive."

Foxes suffer disease just like other animals. Rabies is the worst offender. But distemper, mange and even internal parasites take their toll. In 50

years, the Fox River Valley Hunt has encountered four foxes too sick to survive. Three were near death from mange and were missing most of their fur; the fourth so sick he could not get up.

How smart are foxes? Stories are numerous of the many ploys foxes have used for their own benefit. They have led the hounds repeatedly on a long and puzzling chase, only to be seen later happily trotting behind the riders who are following the hounds. Many is the time they have been seen to wait and see how close the hounds can come to them before they bolt for a cover or wooded area only to vanish again. "Smart as a fox" is a phrase everyone has heard, but few casual admirers can know just how bright this little fellow really is.

It has been said that the fox has figured out how to rid himself of fleas. Putting a stick or piece of wood in his mouth he will slowly submerge himself into a pond or stream tail first, then when all the fleas crawl on the wood to escape the water, he casually lets it float away. Can many other animals boast such intelligence?

All foxhunters have experienced the mystery of a vanishing fox and scent after a long chase. Foxes enjoy the chase until they tire of it, and then, that's that. Foxes will swim a stream, jump to rock walls, or run through cattle or deer knowing all these elements will ruin their scent.

Author and sportsman J. Blan Van Urk explains the fox best in his book, *The Story of American Foxhunting*: "When the new breed of sportsman appeared on the scene and recognized that here was no ordinary beast, the fox came into his own glory; and after this it wasn't long before the rules and standards of fair play were instituted between them. Organized foxhunting was undertaken as it was known, whereby the fox participated in the game while the hunter agreed to show and provide good sport." Van Urk further explains, "True, there would always be the element of danger, but this is the case in any rugged game. Every time a fox heard hounds speak or a horn blow, the crack of the whip or a huntsman's cheer, it meant trouble and possible death were afoot: however, after the varied injustices he had known (fire, spear, arrow, poison and gun) these tactics were stimulating rather than frightening. There was dignity and form to the whole procedure. It supplied a delightful medium through which to display extraordinary talents, and besides kept him on the 'qui vive.' As for the danger, how could a noisy pack of hounds cope with the craft, courage, speed, and presence of mind of an experienced freebooter; that is unless he became careless or out of condition, in which case he wasn't much credit to his breed."

The fox is a rare prodigy, there is no doubt of that. He has survived all the forces Mother Nature can throw at him while learning to adapt to man's pursuit and encroachment, as well as the ensuing pollution. This is all the more remarkable because, as Van Urk points out, "he maintains the charm of infinite variety in a world where sameness is almost a fetish." He lives, plays and totally exists on variety throughout his being. Knowledge of this

remarkable little fellow makes hunting more enjoyable for those who take the time to learn.

Armed with a wealth of knowledge alone does not guarantee a find or a logical completion to all hunts, as the classic story of the disappearing fox reveals. The story of the Ravensworth Fox by F.G. Skinner, printed in the Cincinnati Times on October 1, 1879, told of the fox who eluded the Chichester family of Fairfax County, Va., repeatedly. Furthermore, he eluded any packs that the family invited to pursue him. He was an old red, dog fox that was recognized by the unusually large white tip on his tail. For three successive seasons, he eluded the various packs, and always ended the long and varied chase in the same pasture. He became known as the Ravensworth fox, or "old Raven." In frustration, the foxhunters hired a local boy to sit in a tree overlooking the field where the fox always ended his run and to report what happened. The boy sat there for the duration of the fox's entertainment, then watched and listened to the approach of the pack in full cry toward him. He saw the famous old fox approach, hop on a post-and-rail fence, where he trotted along for about a hundred yards. Then, the fox hopped onto the limb of an old apple tree, where he curled up completely invisible to the huntsman and hounds.

This method of ending the hunt, as well as many more like it, has allowed Reynard to survive and flourish in almost all parts of the globe. His adaptability has stood him in good stead and his versatility has won the respect of those who follow him with hounds.

Foxes, foxhounds, and horses are the basic ingredients necessary for the pleasures that abound from the way of life that some would call a pastime or recreation, some a sport. Foxhunters love and appreciate nature, animals and the opportunity to watch them do what they are bred to do. As the famous artist, Snaffles wrote in his essays titled, *"Red Letter Days"*: "the view of a little fox slipping across a close grown ride quickens the spirit to a pitch of excitement as genuine to those who are lucky enough to know it, as it is incomprehensible to those who are not."

This poetic man went on to encapsulate that when he said, "Even though in the heat of the chase, Beauty and Speed and Endeavor seem fused in a single rapture of excitement. There are other quieter hours in the course of a day's hunting, when a deep joy in so much that is lovely translates a moment to something as near complete happiness as one may go." That private fraternity of foxhunting devotees can truly appreciate the significance of his lines.