

Conservation Corner

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Last week we looked at the many mammals who call Iowa home. This week we'll take a closer look at one of the flesh-eating or carnivore mammals that live in Iowa and throughout the Northern Hemisphere—the smart and wily red fox.

The red fox, *Vulpes vulpes*, is a member of the Canidae Family that also includes dogs, wolves, and jackals. The largest of all true foxes, the red fox has an elongated body with a long, bushy tail. In fact, the word fox derives from a word meaning tail. In all seasons and color phases, you can easily identify its distinctive, white-tipped tail. While known for their cunning and smarts, foxes are also very good athletes, agile jumpers, and good swimmers.

Red foxes use their excellent hearing to locate their prey, mostly small rodents but also rabbits, game birds, reptiles, invertebrates, and young ungulates. They also eat fruit and vegetables in season. When hunting prey, the fox leaps, sailing high over its target, steering with its tail, and landing on lunch or dinner 15 feet away. Hunters of foxes include wolves, coyotes, big cats, and, of course, humans. The red fox, with its dense, soft, silky, and fairly long fur is one of the most important furbearing animals. In Iowa, the trapping and hunting season for red and gray fox runs from Nov. 1-Jan. 31.

Red foxes raise one litter per year, usually giving birth in early spring to four to six kits. The blind, deaf, and toothless newborns weigh only 2-4 ounces. The playful youngsters first leave the den or burrow at 3-4 weeks and reach adult size at 6-7 months. They live in family groups with both parents taking care of the children.

Perhaps you have a family group living in your neighborhood. At the Wiegert Farmstead, there's a red fox den beneath the old cob house. It's fun to catch the kits playing in the early morning sunshine. At a recent ballgame, my brother related he had spent a couple hours that day watching a red fox crouched on the hill just south of their house. The fox in turn was watching a pickup that had pulled into a nearby windmill site. It wasn't until the workers left in mid-afternoon that the fox finally trotted off to the east.

Many cultures feature foxes in their mythology including the Celts, Chinese, Japanese, Arabs, and Native Americans. To the Achomawi, a small tribe in northeastern California known for their basket-weaving, the fox and coyote are co-creators of the world. Foxes abound in fiction, too, from Reynard the Fox to Foxy Loxy to Brer Fox. Did you know the word shenanigan is from the Irish expression *sionnachuighim* and means, "I play the fox"?

I'll close with an Aesop Fable in which a fox uses a common excuse of mine. Driven by hunger, a fox tries to reach some grapes hanging on a vine. Finally giving up, he remarks, "Oh, they aren't even ripe yet! I don't need any sour grapes."

How about you?



Photo by Hugh Perry

