

If You Were A Fox In The Forest...

by Despina Rosales

Rebel Without A Bone

If you were a fox in the forest, you would be known as a *canid*, which means a member of the dog family "Canidae". But your cat-like characteristics would make you quite unusual for a dog and you'd be considered to be a bit of a weirdo at the annual Convention of Canine Critters.

To begin with, your light frame, thin legs and disproportionately long tail would give you excellent cat-like balance. And you would hunt like a cat too: you'd stalk the prey, pounce on it, pin it down with your paws, and then (instead of shaking it to death like other canines do) clamp your thin, curved, feline-ish fangs on the animal's throat until it dies.

Other catty features include retractable claws, fur between toe-pads to silence your steps, and vertically-slit pupils complete with glow-in-the-dark eyes to provide outstanding night-vision.

Don't Look At Me Like That!

Regardless of their good night-vision, foxes generally have weak eyesight. That means that if you were a fox in the forest, you'd be able to detect movement well, but you would find it harder to see something that stood very still.

Luckily your hearing would be very good - about three times better than a human's, in fact. But it'd be your sense of smell that would be waaaaay above average and really important to your survival.

Seeing The World Through Your Nose

If you were a fox, you wouldn't survey your surroundings through your eyes like a human does, but instead through the 200 million glands (or *olfactory receptors*) in your nose.

The black pad you see at the end of a fox snout is only the tip of the actual nose. A fox's nose occupies the entire muzzle, all the way back to the eyes.

That's one big honker you'd have if you were a fox in the forest. All the better to smell with...

A Knowing Nose

Foxes are able to inhale a breath of air through their nose, and distinguish each separate scent. So if you were a fox holidaying in the city, you could walk past a bakery and be able to detect each type of bread and the different ingredients in each type of bread - unlike humans, most of whom would smell just bread.

Mating Scents

Smells would be an important method of communication if you were a fox in the forest. For example, during mating season, you would use the delicate scent from a special gland on your tail to tell other foxes that you're available for a date.

This can be a good relationship-starter for young adults; releasing this odour to another fox is like sending flowers. Your stink means a lot to them!

Pee For Property

If you were a fox in the forest, you wouldn't use only scents to find love, you'd also keep official property records that way. But this time, you would use the unique odour of your urine to tell other foxes that certain territory is yours.

It's a big job too: property records must be updated frequently because they dilute after a few days pass or when rain falls. So you'd have to keep weeing in the same areas to make sure others know that you still lived at that address.

After A Meal

To improve the efficiency of scavenging, when a fox finds food and eats it all, it will then mark the spot with urine. This tells other foxes: "All gone!", so that they don't waste time in that area and move on to find food elsewhere.

Making A Splash

If you were a fox in the forest, smelling the nearby trees would be like reading a bulletin board. You would stroll by and use your nose to "read" the information "written" by others who had urinated there.

And with a strategically placed spray, you'd leave your own personal note for other foxes to "read". Just one splash of wee would be enough to tell others you'd been there.

Fox FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

What do you call a group of foxes?

A skulk.

How fast is a fox?

It can reach speeds of about 20 kilometres an hour.

What's a fox's tail called?

A brush.

How old do foxes get?

12 years of age is considered old for a fox.

Can foxes swim?

It's not a favourite hobby or anything, but foxes have no problems swimming if the need arises.

What are male and female foxes called?

The male is called a dog, and the female is called a vixen.

Do foxes mate for life?

Foxes often pair up with the same mate every year, and some mate for life.

What are baby foxes called?

Most commonly they are called cubs, kits or pups.

Are foxes solitary or pack animals?

Generally, foxes are solitary creatures. But during mating season they travel in pairs, and when the kits are born, both parents stay together to look after them for the first few months.

After that, the dog returns to his solitary lifestyle. It is then up to the vixen to raise the kits, sometimes with the help of a daughter who didn't leave home like her other littermates.

Is there such a thing as a dog-fox cross?

Nope, I'm afraid not. Foxes are related to other canines, such as wolves and dingos, but belong to their own sub-family (called *Vulpinae*) and therefore have a different number of chromosomes. This means they can't crossbreed with other canids. So if you ever see a foxy-looking dog, that's exactly what it is: a dog with foxy features. It's not a dog-fox cross, because there's no such thing.

What serious diseases can affect a fox?

Mange, parvo enteritis and rabies.

What is the fox's most dangerous rival?

Its greatest animal enemy is humans, because we shoot foxes for "sport" or catch them with cruel leg-hold traps for their beautiful fur.

Do foxes make good pets?

In a word: no!

But why not?

Owning a fox is not allowed in most places, and illegally-owned foxes just get confiscated and put down. Like cats and rabbits, foxes are not native to Australia; they were introduced. They are now feral and cause many problems for native animals and farmers. Also, most vets are not qualified to deal with exotic animals, so there'd be no-one to help if the fox gets sick.

With care and maintenance, domesticated animals (like dogs, cats and some birds) thrive as in-home companions, but a wild animal simply cannot. A fox is no exception. So the best thing to do is to leave such wildlife where it belongs: in the wild! And ideally in its natural habitat.

Fox Facts

There are about 20 different types of fox and they are found on every continent except Antarctica.

Foxes are thought to be the most versatile of the canids - this is because they can settle into environments ranging from the ice-cold Arctic to hot dry deserts of Africa and the Middle East.

In Australia there were no foxes until 1845. The European red fox was introduced so that they could be hunted for "sport". These foxes were so successful in adapting to their new environment that they are now considered by farmers to be a pest that should be exterminated.

The grey fox is the oldest of the fox species - about six million years old. It is also sometimes known as the "tree fox" because it's the best tree-climber of all the foxes.

The red fox is the largest, most adaptable, and by far the best known of all foxes. It's frequently found in urban areas and is one of the only wild creatures in the world that can successfully make a life for itself in cities.

The youngest species is thought to be the arctic fox, which is only about a quarter of a million years old.

The fennec or desert fox, is the smallest of the foxes. It is found in some of the hottest and driest places on earth.