

Sandy Hook Plants and Wildlife Series

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

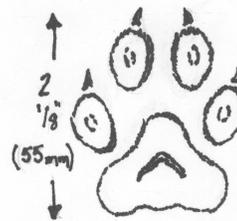
Gateway National Recreation Area



Red Fox



A Sandy Hook resident



*Fore Print
2-1/8" Long*



*Hind Print
Slightly smaller
and narrower*

Description and habitat

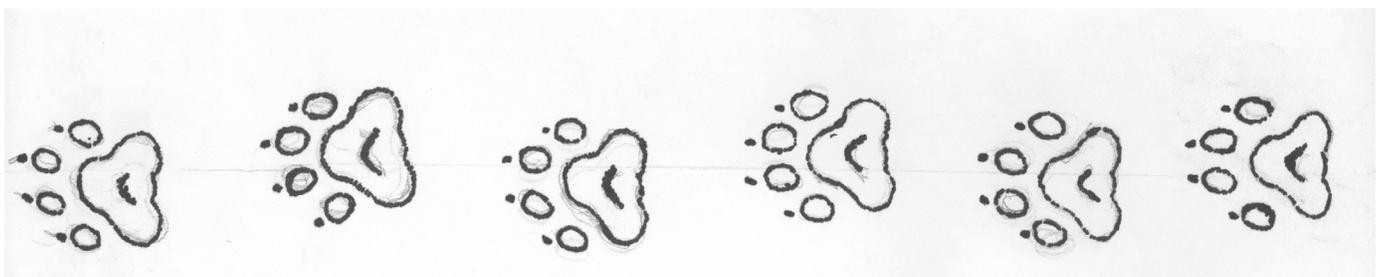
The Red Fox is one of the most adaptable and widespread mammals in North America. It resembles a small dog, with reddish-brown fur, large pointed ears, a skinny muzzle, and a long bushy tail with a white tip (called a *brush*). Unlike the family pet, however, the red fox is a wild animal with an extraordinary ability to survive in a range of habitats. Foxes live in bur-

rows or dens located near wooded areas, around the edges of grassy fields and marshes, under stable sand dunes, or even in towns and cities. While not always present on Sandy Hook, the current population of fox probably became established from individuals walking over the Highlands bridge or crossing the ice sometime in the late 1980s.

A skulk of foxes

The male red fox is called a *dog fox* and the female is called a *vixen*. They mate in the winter and stay together as a family until their offspring (or *kits*) are fully grown. Typically, there are three to eight kits in a litter. The vixen stays in the den to nurse her kits while the dog fox hunts and supplies her with food. After about two weeks, the vixen can leave the den for short periods of time to hunt for her own food.

Once the kits are weaned, both parents teach them the skills they need to survive on their own. Through play and games, the kits learn how to forage and hunt for food and to defend themselves. By the end of the summer, the kits are ready to seek out their own territory, although red foxes will sometimes live in groups if there is sufficient food in the area. A group of foxes is called a skulk.



Hunting for Opportunity

Red foxes survive well in many different places because they can eat almost anything. Primarily carnivores, they eat mice, rabbits, and other small rodents. When necessary and available, however, foxes also eat earthworms and insects, fruits and berries, and even garbage left by humans.

Fox tracks are easy to identify. When they walk or trot, foxes place each foot directly

in front of the other, so their tracks are arranged in a straight line rather than side by side. They hunt at night, using their excellent sense of hearing and a variety of hunting and ambush techniques. Stalking, leaping, snatching, or pouncing, foxes vary their methods depending on the prey they are after. Resourceful red foxes adapt their diets and their hunting strategies to the opportunities around them.

A Question of Balance

Skilled in survival with no predators on Sandy Hook to keep them in check, a growing fox population presents a challenge for wildlife managers. Red foxes sometimes prey on nesting shorebirds, such as the endangered piping plovers that migrate to Sandy Hook each spring. Even though the National Park Service erects

fences during nesting season to help protect the plovers, a clever red fox can learn to dig under the fences to get to the nests. Foxes will eat the eggs, the chicks, and even the adult birds. Once foxes learn this behavior, they are likely to repeat it, and will have a devastating effect on the numbers of piping plovers on Sandy Hook.

What can you do ?

When fox populations have few controls, they not only cause a serious impact on endangered shorebirds, but also become more bold and aggressive with humans. Visitors to Sandy Hook can help to keep the red fox population from increasing unnaturally by observing two important rules: don't feed the foxes and carry out all your trash.

It is also important not to disturb shorebird nesting sites during the spring and early summer, and to obey the posted signs directing visitors away from beach nesting areas. Disturbance can frighten the adult birds from the nest, leaving the eggs or chicks more vulnerable to predation or destruction from the hot sun.

Fast Facts:

Scientific Name:	Genus: <i>Vulpes</i> Species: <i>vulpes</i>
Size:	Total length is between 36 and 43 inches, not including the tail.
Weight:	10- 11 pounds on average. Males are usually larger and heavier than females.
Identification:	Reddish- brown coat with white belly and a white- tipped tail; black feet and black behind the ears.
Breeding:	Foxes mate in late winter/early spring; average gestation period is 51 to 53 days; .
Offspring:	There are typically 3 to 8 kits in a litter.
Food:	A variable diet includes: mice, rabbits, reptiles, earthworms, insects, small birds and their eggs, fruits, and garbage left by humans
Lifespan:	Foxes live between 2 and 3 years in the wild but up to 15 years in captivity.
Range:	The United States and Canada, excluding major desert areas.
Management needs:	A combination of strategies that include plans for reducing and/or controlling the fox population while increasing endangered shore-bird productivity and survival.

For More Information

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