

“Fox” by Sally Cureton

A common animal around Massanutten Village that many have seen is the fox - just saw one myself, this morning. There are two types of fox here and in the rest of the United States, the red fox and the gray fox. Both are smaller than many other wild dogs, weighing only about 8-12 pounds and standing 12-16 inches tall at the shoulders. Both have long full tails, but the red fox is slightly larger than the gray fox and will have a broader face. The population distribution of the two also varies slightly. The Gray fox is found primarily south of the Canadian border, while the red fox extends its range up into Canada and Alaska.

A red fox is usually red, but can be black or marbled and have a solid red tail or one with a white tip. Gray foxes are mostly gray and have a black tip on their tail. They both eat a wide variety of foods including insects, small rodents, reptiles, amphibians, fruit, birds and carrion. They act like cats when stalking and pouncing on their prey. If there is enough, they will eat about one pound of food at a feeding. If more is killed than they can eat, they will bury the surplus in the ground covered with grass and leaves.

Gray foxes generally live in forest habitats and are primarily nocturnal. This fox is the only member of the dog family that climbs trees. They will do so out of curiosity, to find food, to escape from dogs or to just lie on a tree limb in the sun. The red fox is more active during the day and will live in fields, forests and suburban neighborhoods. Because of this they are the one of the two types that is most often encountered by humans. This animal's ability to adapt rivals that of man and rat. Both types will make their den in an old woodchuck burrow, a hollow long or small depression under rocks or tree trunks. And, they are fast - they can run about 26 miles per hour at top speed, but will slow down after an initial spurt. When there are young at home, adults will generally travel less than a mile or so from the den, but during the rest of the year, they may cover an area of 5-10 miles in diameter.

The red fox usually mates in January and February; the gray in February and March. Pregnancy averages 53 days and both species have one litter each year. The usual number of pups is 4-6. The female will stay in the den with the young for the first few days while the male brings food to her. At birth, the pups weight about 3 ½ ounces. Their eyes open around eight days after birth. At about 10 weeks of age, they will begin hunting with their parents. In the fall, the family disperses and the young will breed the following year. When not raising young they are solitary.

Many people are frightened of foxes, but they are beneficial predators

that eat small rodents like mice and rats. The female fox is called a vixen. The source of this distinction in names goes back to Old English. Both the “v” and the “f” sounds are made in the same part of the mouth. As languages age sounds are frequently interchanged and become modified over time. In this case, the original word was “fixen” and morphed into vixen, while “fox” retained the “f” sound.

One more note before I finish up this month - Sometimes the urge to clean up our lots means clearing out all of the dead wood. Actually, what we should be doing is leaving it all in place. Snags, logs and dead woody debris are all part of a mature and healthy forest. Those downed twigs and logs provide critical wildlife habitat. Small animals use the dead wood for nesting, roosting, foraging and perching. Foxes, squirrels and chipmunks are likely to seek shelter in hollowed logs. Salamanders and small critters will use those logs as cover from predators. Insects, fungi and lichens will use them for food and shelter.

It may appear to be a mess, but in actuality it is a very beneficial situation for the forest as a whole. Dead wood that decays in place helps to maintain the carbon and nutrients in the forest and build fertile soil. Piling brush and leaves around trees can have a detrimental effect on their health. The decay of these piles takes enough oxygen and moisture from tree roots sufficiently over time to actually kill a tree. So remember, leave those twigs and logs in place and keep your corner of the forest healthy.