

The Outside Story



Foxes Active in Late Winter

By: Meghan McCarthy
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The first time I saw the fox last February, I did a double take. It was late morning when I glanced out the window on my way from one task to the next. The unexpected flash of red made me stop and forget about the morning's to-do list.

I watched for several minutes as the fox trotted around boulders and past old apple trees. Every now and then it paused and cocked its head before continuing on a meandering path through the stubbly field. This would be the first of many sightings over the next several weeks.

Last February's fox was likely seeking either a mate or lunch. When many other animals are hunkered down against the cold this time of year, both red and gray foxes are on the move.

"Both species experience an increase in activity, both diurnal and nocturnal, and an increase in home range size during the

winter months," said Chris Bernier, furbearer project leader for the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department. He attributed this increase to changes in prey availability, as well as breeding activities.

Foxes may venture close to human habitations in winter, because food is scarce, and rodents tend to congregate in our barns, fields and underneath the bird feeders. And because voles, a main winter prey animal for foxes, are active during day and night, foxes hunt them whenever they have the opportunity. They use their keen hearing to locate the rodents moving beneath the snow before pouncing through the powder or frozen crust.

Red foxes often appear in open fields, like the one where I spotted the fox last winter. Gray foxes are more prevalent in areas where forests and fields meet in brushy edges. We have both types of habitat around our home and have captured both species on the game camera.

The most common evidence of foxes is in the multitude of tracks we find in the snow, crisscrossing the fields and the paths through the woods. My puppy follows these tracks, stopping every few yards to stick her nose into the cold white.

What she garners from those sniffs, I've no idea. But foxes – both red and gray – are leaving plenty of scent communications this time of year. Red foxes mate from late January into February, while gray fox mating activity peaks about a month later. In common with many other animals, scent marking increases exponentially when foxes are looking for love.

If you've ever noticed a skunky smell during outings through field or forest this time of year, chances are you're getting a whiff of

red fox urine, left at some strategic location to announce territorial boundaries and breeding potential to other foxes. Gray foxes, Bernier said, also mark, but without a noticeably skunky scent.

“Both species mark on rocks, stumps, or any other prominent object. Red foxes, and to a lesser extent gray foxes, typically mark on such objects along trails and forested edges,” explained Bernier. “Marking is believed to be more frequent in the weeks leading up to and through the breeding season.”

That explains why I often catch that skunky aroma during my woods walks this time of year. Both male and female foxes leave scent communication via urine, and Bernier said an observant tracker can discern the sex of the marker by examining tracks: a squat indicates a female, a spray indicates a male.

While foxes are not strictly monogamous, breeding pairs do generally stay together after mating, through the birth of kits (there are five or six in a typical litter) in late March or April, until late summer, when the family unit disperses.

A male fox will hunt and deliver food to his mate once she has whelped, and after the kits are weaned, will bring food for the whole family until the kits are able to leave the den and learn to hunt on their own.

That may explain the frequency with which we noticed the reappearance of our neighborhood red fox in early April last year, when we spotted him sauntering through the field several times in one week. Perhaps he had many hungry mouths to feed, hidden away in a den not far from our home.

I haven't seen any foxes yet this winter. But their tracks are there, traversing the front yard, the back orchard, and the wide woods trail. And lately I've been catching that signature skunky whiff that means fox love is in the air. I'm keeping a lookout, hoping I'm lucky enough again to see a flash of red moving through the snowy field.

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