

# WHEN RED FOXES BECOME A PROBLEM



**DESCRIPTION:** The red fox is a member of the dog family (*Canidae*) and is indigenous to Prince Edward Island. Its normal pelage (fur) colour is orange-red but “silver” (black) and cross colour phase also occur. Their long-haired coats give the impression that they are large animals but adult red foxes weigh about 5.5 kg (12 lb) on average and range in weight from 4 to 6.5 kg (9 to 14 lb); young-of-the-year weigh less, particularly during their first fall (based on weights obtained from foxes trapped on P.E.I. during the fall and winter).

**HABITAT:** The red fox prefers semi-open country and thrives in early successional habitat or environments that have been altered by human activities or disturbed by natural phenomena such as forest fires. Agricultural areas provide ideal habitat for foxes, particularly when fields are interspersed with small woodlots, streams and wetlands. The red fox benefited from the impact of humans on the landscape and there are more foxes today in North America than when settlers first came to this continent.

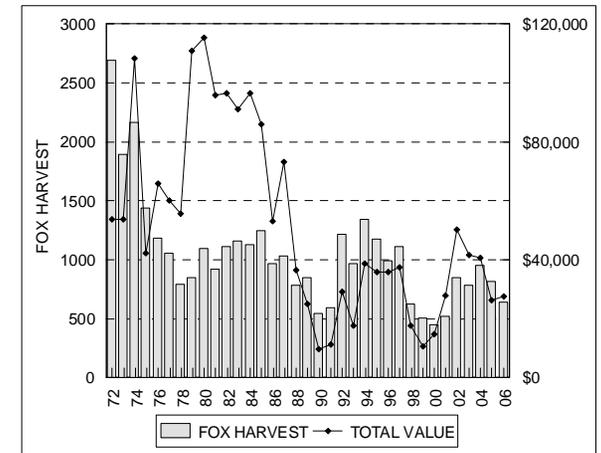
**HISTORY:** Prince Edward Island’s red foxes are world famous. The first successful attempts at breeding the silver phase of the red fox occurred in P.E.I. Wild red foxes from the Island continue to command the top prices at International fur auctions. Foxes are considered to have long-haired fur and, like all fur-bearers, markets are subject to the whims of fashion with prices varying accordingly.

**FOX-COYOTE INTERACTIONS:** The arrival of the eastern coyote, another wild member of the dog family, in the early 1980’s has had a negative impact on red fox populations. Coyotes do not tolerate red foxes within their home ranges. Coyote home ranges cover as much as 50 km<sup>2</sup> (20 mi<sup>2</sup>); foxes, 4 – 8 km<sup>2</sup> (1.5 - 3 mi<sup>2</sup>). Where coyote and fox ranges overlap, foxes are forced into areas unoccupied by coyotes. As the coyote population increased on the Island, red foxes were driven from their traditional, more remote habitat in



small woodlots to more exposed, less desirable habitat in closer association with humans. With the increase in coyotes, available habitat for foxes decreased as did the fox population. Today, even though foxes are highly visible and appear to be abundant, the total population has actually declined.

## Red fox harvest & value in PEI



The harvest of coyotes peaked during the 2003-04 trapping season, indicating that coyote population has reached peak density. If the same pattern occurs on P.E.I. that has occurred in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, coyotes should decline and level off at a lower population density. Foxes should increase slightly and level off as well,

thus achieving a sort of equilibrium with coyotes.

**FOX-HUMAN INTERACTIONS:** Today, red foxes can be found not only in the yards of rural homes but also suburban and urban areas. People in the Charlottetown, Stratford and Summerside areas now encounter foxes routinely, as do rural residents. Many have voiced concern about the hazards associated with this urban fox population.

### **Attractants**

The red fox is a *wild* animal and attempts to tame it should be avoided. Do not feed them or leave garbage or other refuse where they have access to it. The practice of feeding pets outside should be avoided. It often attracts foxes as well as other wild mammals including raccoons and skunks. Once formed, the habit of obtaining easy access to food is difficult to break, as is the ensuing nuisance caused when foxes frequent backyards and decks looking for handouts. Bird feeders may also attract them since their appetites run the full gamut of birds, mammals, fruits, berries, seeds, and even grass. Those who feed birds during spring and summer should insure that feed is placed in areas inaccessible to foxes.

### **Approachability**

Foxes should flee when approached by people. However, pups may show little fear, especially if the *vixen* has been killed and the pups are on their own. In this case aggressively chase or frighten the pups off the property to give them a healthy fear of humans. Never feed them or attempt to tame them, and discourage neighbours from this practice. Foxes with a healthy fear of humans and left to their own devices, will not pose a danger to people. On the contrary, they are fascinating wild creatures to observe and will provide a great deal of amusement to those interested in wildlife behaviour.

### **Attacks**

Fears of foxes attacking children are unfounded. However, as with all wild carnivores, if they are

encouraged (with offers of food) to approach people they can become a serious nuisance. Problems with wild carnivores biting humans are invariably associated with people feeding them. This usually occurs in parks but can happen in urban and suburban areas as well.

### **Disease**

Some Islanders have expressed fears of foxes spreading diseases such as rabies. We in P.E.I. are fortunate in not having fox rabies here. We do have bat rabies but it is spread from the infected bat to the victim and usually stops there. Diseases such as distemper are not passed on to humans and we are not aware of other diseases unique to foxes on P.E.I. that could be passed on to humans.

### **Domestic Pets**

Young foxes are playful and are attracted by other small animals, even domestic animals such as cats and small dogs. Some people have observed foxes and house cats cavorting on their lawns. In some cases this appears to be akin to play but there may be some aggressive behaviour involved. Of the fox-cat interactions that have been received at the Fish and Wildlife Division, no cat mortalities have been reported. This is not surprising when one considers an immature fox might weigh just 6 or 8 pounds while a house cat can top the scales at 12 to 15 pounds or more.

### **Coping With Foxes**

Foxes commonly live in close association with human residences and communities. They frequently inhabit yards, parks, and golf courses, especially in areas that adjoin suitable, undeveloped habitat. Healthy foxes pose virtually no danger to humans. Foxes can grow accustomed to human activity but are seldom aggressive toward people. Expanding housing development, particularly in historically rural areas, increases the chances of interactions between humans and foxes, as well as other wildlife. Many homeowners do not realize that their lawn may be

as attractive a habitat to foxes as the surrounding woodland. People uncomfortable with the presence of foxes should remove attractants, exclude foxes with fencing and employ scaring techniques. Trapping and relocating foxes is not recommended because the PEI's fox population and fox "problems" are widespread and relocated foxes can cause problems in new locations. Eliminating healthy foxes is not warranted based solely on human safety concerns. In many cases, homeowner's perceptions of problems are unfounded and in some cases, the mere presence of a fox is perceived as a problem.

The red fox is a natural part of our wild fauna and should be appreciated in that context. Because of the natural range extension of the eastern coyote, the red fox population has been subjected to abnormally strong pressure to find unoccupied habitat on P.E.I. They have been forced to co-exist more closely with humans, resulting in adjustments by both humans and foxes, which may prove mutually beneficial.

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