

CALL OF THE FOX

We think of the fox as a loner, cunning, sly and crafty, prowling the countryside in search of food. Breaking into chicken runs in the dead of night, or robbing shepherds of their feeble young lambs. Hunting alone maybe, but while such misdemeanours have cemented the fox's malevolent reputation, it is not a loner, as foxes are known to live either in pairs or in loose family groups within a wider territory.

The fox is a quiet animal, only expressing vocalisations when in the presence of others of its own kind. As a member of the dog family, its most usual sound is that of a bark, mostly given as a warning to other foxes, perhaps cubs that might be in danger.

A type of vocalisation sounding like a rapid chattering or stuttering is used in aggressive interactions and is known as gekkering. This sound is most often heard when cubs are play fighting in spring.

Although mostly silent in their habits, it is in mid-winter when foxes frequently make their presence known to each other and to us after dark. On cold, clear winter nights, the mournful, husky cry of a fox may be heard echoing across the countryside. This contact call often described as 'wow-wow-wow' can be given by either sex. Roughly translated into human language it means 'Here I am, where are you?' and occurs when a vixen is in season.

A dog fox produces sperm from November to February, but the actual mating season is January to February. The vixen's reproductive cycle is monoestrous, meaning she only comes into heat once annually. During this time she is at peak receptivity for a maximum of only three days, so it is crucial that mating takes place at exactly the correct time for fertilisation to be successful. Hence the frequent vocalisations of foxes on winter nights.

The purpose of this persistent contact calling is the precursor to copulation. During a successful mating the couple become firmly locked together (or tied) for up to 30 minutes or more. This is due to the arrangement of blood vessels and a bone, the baculum, in the male's genitals. This is thought to diminish the possibility of another dog fox mating with the vixen, before the first male has fertilised her.

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