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CITY OF FOXES

Urban but wild—foxes in Whitehorse

Photos and foreword by Peter Mather



The red fox is well suited to thrive in the rapidly expanding urban-wild interfaces around our planet. Celebrated for their cunning intelligence, foxes have adapted to the human world with astonishing success. A 2020 article in the Royal Society's research journal *Proceedings B* found that urban foxes were developing small skulls and stubbier snouts, indicating that the move from forests to cities could be setting them on a path to domestication. (These changes are believed to result from changing cognitive demands and a different diet.)

Red foxes can be found nearly everywhere in the northern hemisphere, inhabiting northern Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and beyond. You might bump into one in London, England, where the London Wildlife Trust estimates 10,000 of these canids live. By contrast, you might also see a red fox chasing an Arctic fox on the outskirts of Tuktoyaktuk, N.W.T., or watch a red fox while enjoying a bowl of ramen noodles on the island of Hokkaido, in Japan. But perhaps no place is as well-matched to red foxes than Whitehorse, the "Wilderness City," where the fox has found the ideal community surrounded by green space.

Whitehorse and its human residents are learning to live with their wild neighbours, with foxes denning in every neighbourhood. Last summer, I discovered 20 fox dens in the city, but only recently has my hometown become a fox haven. When I was growing up, red foxes were not a common sight. Roaming the streets of Whitehorse in my teens in the '90s, coyotes owned the streets at night. It seems at the same time the coyote disappeared, red foxes took their place.

But coyotes have also begun returning to downtown Whitehorse. It's not uncommon for downtown residents to see a pair of foxes barking in irritation at an invading coyote. In the summer of 2020, at least three of the dens I was monitoring were invaded by coyotes looking for an easy meal.

It will be interesting to see what the future brings for foxes and coyotes in Whitehorse. Will the coyotes retake the town or does the red fox have a permanent foothold?

Solitary and territorial, foxes live in boreal forests throughout the territory and near urban areas. Vixen (female foxes) may give birth to up to 10 kits between March and May.





The diet of foxes includes mice, voles, squirrels, and grouse, but foxes are opportunistic and will sometimes kill and eat small pets, like cats.



Foxes can thrive in close quarters with humans, but can also come into conflict with our activities.



Baseball, anyone? Foxes have been known to "procure" items like shoes, gloves, and other clothing. Sometimes these get stockpiled near their dens.

