



# MONTEREY NEWS

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## February Foxes

Folks let me know about the wildlife they see, also about tracks. Just now I am hearing about foxes. In the middle of December Steve Moore told me about two foxes at the west end of his and Wendy's field. He didn't see them at that time, but heard them, making quite a racket. He told me that this was right near a place where there had been a fox den during the past summer.

About a month after that, Wendy gave me a great description of a pair of foxes she and Steve had seen while out on a walk. She described their lush coats and tails so well I felt I could see them myself. She wondered if this were a mated pair, or a courting pair, and if this were typical for the middle of January. We both thought it might be a little early. I had been thinking the snow fleas (springtails) were early this year. And maybe the bluebirds. I think some of us puzzle over this every year, about the return of the robins, too.

To answer Red Fox questions, I go to Leonard Lee Rue III's amazing book, *The Life of the Red Fox*, J.B. Lippincott Company, NY, 1969. Here is what I found in Rue's book.

I will be writing about Red Foxes not Grey Foxes here. Four years back I wrote a comparison about the two, which are completely different species and do not interbreed. The red ones were introduced here by the colonial English, looking for a familiar quarry, for their fox hunting on horseback. They wanted a fox easy to spot as it ran across open fields. The native fox here was the Grey Fox, not at all given to running across open fields, more to disappearing into the woods or even up a tree.

The foxes (red) are at their lowest population point in winter, but by late November they go through physical changes, getting ready to increase their numbers. The males' testicles become enlarged and produce live sperm. From this time until late April, the male can breed, but the only outward change in him is that he is looking for a mate. The female comes into heat in January or early February. Even the newly matured pups of the past year are ready to reproduce, at ten months old.



*Bonner McAllester and Joan Kleban.*

Foxes have a sharp bark and can be heard any time, but folks hear it much more often in the winter. They give two or three yaps and then a tapering off at the end. Sometimes they give a real blood-curdling (says Rue) shriek, especially the females. During this time, and all year round, both the males and the females use scent posts. They may be clumps of grass or snow, or rocks, or old bones. Here they may urinate or defecate, for communication purposes. If defecating is the medium with the message, foxes often put it in the middle of a path. I knew a man who left a short piece of a flat board in the middle of the path. Before long he would find a regular solid-matter message there from a fox. He would toss it off, replace the board, and then always find another the next time he came by.

We biologists love to count things. Some have followed the tracks of a fox in a snowy field and found he refreshed his urine scent posts forty or fifty times in one night. Rue reminds his readers that you can tell a male messenger from a female one by looking closely at the tracks. She will squat, he will stand and raise a leg, like our pet dogs.

Usually a fox pairs with his or her mate from the last season. But if one has died, the other looks for a new mate. Sometimes two males will compete for the same female and

will fight. They use their tails while fighting, circling each other. The one with the longer tail has a clear advantage and can flick his tail in the other's face, then bite while his adversary can't see. One fox will also hit the other with his rump, to knock him off his feet. They may rear up on their hind legs, putting their forepaws on each other's chests, pushing while slashing with their teeth. They growl, and hiss, and squall. The loser runs off fast, pursued only a short distance.

Is this a love story? Of course. This is February, valentine month for everyone, and spring is coming. The male and female are inseparable, cooperate in hunting, in choosing a den, and then perfecting it. They mate in the middle of the fourteen-day period when the female is in heat, and fifty-one days later, in the middle of March, six or seven pups are born. They are very dark, lead-colored, with eyes closed the first week or so. The male does the hunting in these early days, and the female watches for his return. Rue describes the welcome she gives him.

"The female always saw the male coming before I did, but I instantly knew of his approach because the female's body would become taut and she would shiver in anticipation. As the male drew near, the female bounded out to greet him, uttering a loud, high-pitched wail. When she got close to him, she would flop down on her belly, raise her tail up over her back, and wave it furiously. From the prone position she would spring up and kiss the male all over with her tongue, and the male would reciprocate. The male would then pick up whatever food he had dropped during this exchange and the pair would trot back to the den and the pups." — Bonner McAllester