

GETTING TO KNOW WILDLIFE - One Smart Little Fox



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Having the privilege of getting to know wild mammals when we did wildlife rehabilitation has reinforced our commitment to giving the community a better appreciation of them.

The little red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) was found in a ditch, close to where his mother had been killed by a car. The vixen had been hit while moving her offspring but, save for several scrapes, this tiny fox had been lucky enough to have been thrown clear.

Terrified and shaking with fear, he would lunge making threatening noises but which sounded more like a feeble

sneeze. We knew we had to overcome his fear and meet his need for warmth, food, and a sense of security – the primary needs of all young animals including the human animal – to ensure normal social development.

Barely four weeks old, it was fascinating to watch his early development and learn just how much a fox's behaviour is instinct – bred in the bone so to speak. His play routines involved sneaking up and jumping on an old sock, wrestling it into submission or grabbing some treasure and frantically searching for a place to cache it.

Observing the differences in his response to my husband, Gary, and me taught us about the relationship between the kits and their parents – the dog

or male fox and the vixen. It is in late January that red foxes (often monogamous) mate. After a gestation period of approximately 52 days, the kits are born.

The average litter contains five helpless babies weighing less than a quarter of a pound, the vixen staying with them constantly, acting as a thermal blanket in the still frozen ground of March. During this time, the dog fox brings food to the vixen and continues to share parenting responsibilities until well after the young are weaned and foraging on their own.

This early bond between the kits and parents explained the attachment this little fox developed with me. He would emit a strange melodic greeting call when he heard my voice. It would be followed by an exuberant welcome where he would circle around me, crouched low to the ground, tail moving furiously, ears flat back and a facial expression resembling a lopsided grin before attempting to nudge the corners of my mouth with his muzzle. He would then roll over on his back with legs up in the air, part of the food-begging and submissive behaviour shown by young foxes to their parents in the wild.

He was soon joined by a pair of smaller orphaned foxes and they quickly became a family, going onto the next leg of their rehabilitative care. But that is another great story for another time.