

# Godmother Fox



**W**inter is the season when the red fox, one of the most beautiful wild animals present in this country, can be spotted quite frequently. Due to the snow, lack of food and increased predating or hunting, the red fox comes in a closer contact with people during this season. Those going skiing or just visiting the mountains can see it in the snow near the motorways or on the outskirts of resorts. Villagers are often disturbed by fox tracks near the farms, where the poultry or rabbits are kept, and look for extra security measures. Hunters are excited by the tracks and encouraged to organize another hunting tour. Even in the towns, in exclusive shopping malls,

the presence of the fox, as luxurious fur around ladies' necks, is increased during the winter months.

So, the foxes seem to have survived the modern urbanization and, unlike many other animals, are well represented among our wild life. This might be attributed to their deep traces in Macedonian folklore, especially in the fairy tales and other genres associated with children. There the fox is always called "Godmother" referring to her wit, experience and ability to adapt to new circumstances and to make the best from any given, even unfavourable, situation. Contrasted with the stupid wolf, naïve rabbit and clumsy bear, the fox always dominates, controls, and eventually takes advantage

of any situation. In Macedonian folklore, unlike some other European traditions, its trickster position is viewed in a positive rather than a negative light. Not only is the presence of the fox strong in the folk tradition, but it has also managed to remain prominent in children's literature and in primary education. Even the newly written books give lots of space to the fox and its adventures. It seems that the fox's survival ethics and capabilities to benefit in complex situations are much in demand in the modern society.

Since the fox was so thoroughly humanized in the old times, many modern writers and readers forget that the fox character is based on the actual animal behaviour. Red fox is distinguished by its ability to adapt quickly to new environments. It is very agile, capable of jumping over 2 metres high fences, and swims well. Red foxes have binocular vision, but their sight reacts mainly to movement. Their auditory perception is acute: they are able to hear flying and roosting birds and squeaking mice at about 100 metres. Their orientation and the sense of smell are also good.

Red fox body language consists of the movements of the ears, tail and postures, with their body markings emphasizing certain gestures. Inquisitive foxes will rotate and flick their ears whilst sniffing. Playful individuals will perk their ears and rise on their hind legs. Male foxes courting females, or after successfully evicting intruders will turn their ears outward and raise their tails to a horizontal position, with the tips turned upward. When afraid, red foxes grin in submission, arch their backs and bend their legs, curving their bodies; their tails move back and forth, ears point backwards pressing against the skulls. Submissive foxes will approach dominant animals in a low posture, so that their muzzles reach up in greeting.

The species primarily feeds on small rodents, though it may also

target rabbits, game birds, and reptiles. The animosity to other animals is not a fictional invention. Although the red fox tends to kill smaller predators, it is vulnerable to attacks from larger predators, such as wolves, lynxes, and coyotes. Red foxes prefer to hunt in the early morning hours before sunrise and late evening. They are extremely possessive of their food, and will defend their catch even from dominant animals.

Despite the long history of association with humans, red foxes generally do not make good pets. Kits require almost constant supervision. Once weaned, they may become destructive and damage leather objects, furniture and electric cables. Though generally friendly toward people when young, captive red foxes become fearful of humans once they mature. They maintain their wild counterparts' strong instinct of concealment, and may pose a threat to domestic birds, even when well fed. Practical uses for tame foxes are few, though they can be encouraged to kill rats and mice in granaries.

The red fox have been extensively hunted as a pest and furbearer for many centuries. The earliest historical records of fox hunting come from the 4th century BC and are connected with Macedonia. Alexander the Great is known to have hunted foxes. By the Renaissance, fox hunting became a traditional sport of the nobility. Maybe this is the reason why and successful warriors were associated with the fox. The Medieval Norman adventurer Robert Guiscard was nicknamed "Robert the Fox" as well as the Resourceful, the Cunning, and the Wily - underlining the identification of such qualities with foxes. During World War II, the German commander in North Africa, Erwin Rommel, was grudgingly nicknamed the "Desert Fox" by his British adversaries, as a tribute to his military cunning and skill.