

# Arctic fox

**Latin:** *Vulpes lagopus*  
**French:** Renard Arctique

**German:** Polarfuchs  
**Norwegian:** Fjellrev



Photo: Robert Mark Lehmann

## The cunning bi-colored hunter

The Arctic fox, also known as the **white fox**, **polar fox**, or **snow fox**, is a small-sized fox native to and common throughout the Arctic. It is well adapted to living in cold environments.

## Facts

The Arctic fox is an incredibly hardy animal that can survive temperatures as low as -58°F (-50°C). The defining feature of the Arctic fox is its deep, thick winter fur, which provides superior insulation and allows it to maintain a consistent body temperature. Its thick furry soles or pads allow the Arctic fox to walk on both snow and ice without losing too much body heat. Arctic foxes' thick winter fur is in stark contrast to its remarkably thin summer fur.

The Arctic fox can be seen on islands and on continents throughout the entire Arctic including Alaska, Canada, Greenland, Russia, Scandinavia and Iceland. It mostly inhabits tundra and pack ice, but is also present in boreal forests. Arctic foxes have even been spotted on sea ice close to the North Pole.

Arctic foxes give birth to their pups in burrows, and in a blizzard, they may tunnel into the snow to create shelters in

the treeless tundra landscape. The fox's thick tail (or "brush") aids its balance and is essential for keeping warm in winter. The Arctic fox's extremely insulating winter fur minimizes its exposure to the cold air. Also, its muzzle, ears and legs are short, which helps conserve heat. Arctic foxes change from a thick insulating winter fur to the much thinner summer fur with the seasonal molt. Arctic foxes come in two color morphs, white or blue. Most individuals belong to the white morph (approximately 97-99 percent of the circumpolar arctic fox population), that is uniformly white in the winter to be able to camouflage itself and blend in with the snow and ice. In the summer, it is greyish-brown on the back and thighs and yellowish-white on the belly and the flanks. The blue morph remains charcoal colored all year round, but becomes somewhat lighter in winter. The summer colors of the fox's coat make it possible for the animal to blend in with the colors of the Arctic tundra's rocks and vegetation.

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Photo: Quark Expeditions

Arctic fox normally gives birth to 2–10 pups, in dens. The pups weights 50–65 grams.



Photo: Ole Magnus Rapp

Rabies is present in Arctic regions. Never touch or handle dead foxes.



Photo: Troels Jacobsen

The Arctic fox's fur changes color with the seasons. In most individuals it is white in the winter to be able to camouflage itself and blend in with the snow and ice.

These colorings help foxes to effectively hunt many creatures such as: lemmings, voles, ringed seal pups, fish, waterfowl, geese and seabirds. It also eats carrion, berries, seaweed, vegetables, insects, and other small invertebrates. When food is scarce, Arctic foxes will follow polar bears to eat the scraps from its kills. Arctic foxes are often perceived as trusting and unafraid, but they are usually wary, particularly when they have pups (May–August).

The Arctic Fox is a well-known "host" of the mouse parasite – a tiny tapeworm that lives in the intestines of the fox or other canine species such as arctic dogs. Infested foxes excrete the parasites eggs into the Arctic vegetation or terrain, and people who then accidentally ingest them – for instance after touching this vegetation and putting their fingers in their mouth – are at risk. The eggs travel to the liver, hatch out, and can then cause cysts which are often fatal if not detected and removed.

### Regulations

It is a violation of Svalbard's Environmental Protection Act's general principle of protection to disturb foxes. According to the act, "All species of flora and fauna, including their eggs, nests and lairs, are protected ..." and "all access and passage in Svalbard shall take place in a way that does not harm [...] or in any other way [...] result in unnecessary disturbance of animals." (Section 25 and 73 of Act of 15 June 2001 No.79 Relating to the Protection of the Environment in Svalbard)

In other regions of the Arctic national and local regulations may include other or different provisions. Always check and abide by the legal requirements in the area you are visiting.

Watching undisturbed wildlife in its natural environment is a great experience. To avoid disturbance when close to Arctic fox, you are asked to be considerate and follow these wildlife guidelines.

### Guidelines

- Arctic foxes may be inquisitive. Stay quiet and let the animals approach you and not vice versa.
- Foxes that live near settlements, cabins and camps grow accustomed to humans, and if they are fed, they gradually lose their natural fear. Never feed or attempt to touch Arctic foxes.
- Limit your time in proximity around foxes to avoid unnecessary habituation.
- Do not intentionally walk into areas with fox dens between June and mid-August. If you accidentally find yourself in a foxhole area, retreat quietly the way you came.
- Keep distance to known fox dens, if possible 500 – 1,000 meters depending on the terrain. Dens are often located near the shore, close to bird cliffs.
- Female foxes can give birth to large litters of pups. Sometimes more than 10. If fox pups approach you, leave them alone.
- Rabies has been detected in Arctic regions. Some animals, such as the arctic fox, arctic dogs and arctic wolves are potential carriers of rabies. Close contact to arctic foxes is potentially dangerous because of rabies. Fox bites can be dangerous to humans. Never touch live or dead wild animals. Inform local authorities if you observe dead animals or animals that might carry the rabies virus.

### Signs of disturbance

To avoid unnecessary disturbance of foxes, observe the animal's behavior. If foxes show signs of disturbance, retreat quietly the way you came. If a fox is barking, yelping, or warning its pups, you might be too close. Other visual signs of disturbance can be the flattening of ears, a tail pointed upwards, or behavior suggesting the fox is attempting to flee. An Arctic fox will protect its den and its pups, and during the denning time foxes are most sensitive to disturbance.