

Native Range Map



Fennec Fox

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Sub-Phylum: Vertebrata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Carnivora
Family: Canidae
Genus: *Vulpes*
Species: *zerda*



Photo courtesy of Janet Wisneski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The fennec fox lives in arid (dry) regions of North Africa throughout the Sahara, east to Sinai and Arabia. The foxes inhabit sandy burrows, usually at the base of hills where moisture is likely to be retained the longest. The presence of desert grasses and/or light scrub vegetation is important for the fennec's use in building its den.
- **Exhibit Location:** Adaptation of Animals

Characteristics

- **Weight:** average of 3.3 lbs. **Length:** average of 11-12 inches
- The fennec fox is the smallest canid (from the family Canidae, which includes foxes, wolves, dogs, coyotes, and jackals) with the largest ears. These large ears help them hear prey burrowing in the sand and approaching enemies. The fennec fox loses body heat through the ears, helping them keep cool in the hot, desert climate. Fennec foxes also have hairs inside their ears to help prevent sand and insects from entering.
- Its thick, soft, long fur insulates the fox from the desert nighttime cold and protects it from the hot air during the day. The tail is heavily furred as well, and when curled around the body, acts like insulation. The upper body parts are reddish cream, light fawn, or almost white. The under parts are white and the tip of the tail is black. The feet have hairy soles enabling them to run on the loose desert sand without sinking and protecting it against the hot surface.
- **Lifespan:** **In the Wild** 10 years; **In Captivity** 12 years

Behaviors

- The fennec fox is nocturnal, meaning it rests during the day and is awake during the night.
- It spends the heat of the day underground in its burrow. The burrows are extensive, up to 32 feet long and 3.5 feet deep. They burrow at the base of low hills or dunes where moisture concentrates, keeping their dens cool even in the hottest weather.
- They are opportunistic foragers, meaning they will eat what they find. The foxes will find food at night by digging and scratching at the sand. Captive foxes model this behavior when they scratch and rake the sand in their exhibit.
- Fennec foxes have a variety of calls including soft warning calls, barks, yaps, squeaks and purrs.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** hard-boiled eggs, insects, dog and cat toys

Reproduction

- The foxes live in groups of up to 10 individuals. Males mark their territory with urine and become aggressive during the breeding season. Females are aggressive and defend the nest site when they have newborn offspring. Males remain with their mates after the young are born and defend them but do not enter the maternal den.
- Sexual maturity is reached at 6-9 months of age. Fennec foxes mate for life.

- Mating occurs in January and February. Gestation averages 50 days. The young are born blind and helpless in late winter and early spring, in a den at the foot of a sand dune. They have very small ears and have a blackish coloration on the muzzle, in the back of the ears, and on the upper part of the tail. A litter usually consists of 2-5 cubs. The cubs are weaned at 61-70 days and may eat solid food at 25 days.
- The female provides continuous care for the first 2 weeks after birth. Both the male and female work together in rearing the cubs. Males bring food to the family and watch for dangers to playing cubs.
- There are few reports of successful breeding in captivity.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** fruit, leaves, roots, small rodents, birds, bird eggs, lizards and insects
- **At the Zoo:** canned protein (Science diet and Zupreem feline diet), crickets

Conservation Status

- The IUCN Red List cites fennecs as “data deficient.” CITES places fennecs in Appendix II in Austria, and Appendix III in Denmark and Tunisia. Not enough information has been learned about them in the wild.
- The foxes are not threatened, but there are strict laws to protect them. Sport hunting and intrusion by humans are shrinking their habitat and increasing their scarcity. More research is needed to learn about this species and how it affects its environment. There are protected areas established and managed in their native habitat. Captive breeding programs also exist.
- Predators: humans, eagle owls, and possibly jackals, striped hyenas, and domestic dogs (saluki, a local greyhound-like dog)

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- The fennec fox is difficult to catch because of its keen sense of hearing and smell.
- Male foxes are called dogs; females are vixens; young are cubs.
- An adult fennec fox can jump upward to .7m (2.3 feet) and ahead 1 m (3.28 feet) from the standing position. This helps them catch prey.

Sources:

- Adams, R. 2004. “Vulpes zerda” (on-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed September 16, 2005 at http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Vulpes_zerda.html.
- Lincoln Park Zoo, (n.d.). Fennec fox. Retrieved Sep. 16, 2005, from Lincoln Park Zoo Web site: http://www.lpzoo.org/animals/FACTS/mammals/fennec_fox.html.