



Between 2014-2016, 4 pet foxes were surrendered to us. As they are becoming more popular we are increasingly worried about the fate of these poor animals. They are cute and fluffy, and "I want it!" is the first reaction people have. If you are interested in owning a fox, PLEASE do your research first! All four of our foxes were surrendered by their first owners, who didn't understand what she was getting herself into. Tellingly, fox breeders require you to sign a contract when you buy your fox, stating that you will not bring the animal back if you have problems with it. That should be a big red flag right there.

First and foremost, foxes are WILD ANIMALS. The foxes that are sold as pets have been born and raised around people and are mostly tame, but are in no way domesticated. Domestication is a process that takes hundreds of generations of careful selective breeding to make changes to a species on a genetic level. The backyard breeders in Indiana who sell foxes are not doing that. There are domesticated foxes being produced on a farm in Russia, and can be purchased and shipped to the US for about \$8,000. If you're not paying thousands of dollars for your fox, it's not domesticated. For more information, this is a very informative and interesting article: <http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2012-10/fyi-domesticated-foxes>

Many fox species require a permit to own. Red and gray foxes come in many color variations, but all will require you to get a permit from the DNR and build a suitable enclosure, which the DNR will need to inspect. If you have one of these species, you will need to bring proof of your permit when you take your pet to get vet care. Also, most vets will refuse to care for a fox as they don't want the liability of exposing their staff to wild animals, and the ones that do treat foxes will require that you have a permit (if applicable). Expect your vet bills to be MUCH higher than they would for a dog.

Since they aren't domesticated, foxes are wary about strangers. They will bond with a person that they see every day, but no one else. Some of our volunteers see ours every week, but they still don't "recognize" them as friends. Felix, one of our red foxes, will only let 3 people touch him, and it takes months of patience to get to that stage. Tamaki, our grey fox, will only let one person touch him, and he growls and snaps at everyone else. Any carelessness around him will result in a serious bite. If the bite is reported to the authorities, your fox will be confiscated and tested for rabies. Currently, the only way to reliably test for rabies is to remove the brain and look for the virus. Even if your fox is up-to-date on vaccinations, he will still be euthanized and tested. You will be risking your foxes life every time you have other people around him. Going on vacation will never be as simple as hiring a pet-sitter again.



**Tamaki, a grey fox, shows his teeth**

The first thing many people notice when they come near the fox enclosures is the smell. It is often mistaken for skunk spray, but a fox doesn't only make this smell when threatened. All wild animals produce strong smells that they use to mark their territory. Fox urine is one of the worst smells you will ever come across. In an enclosed area, it is nauseating. (Fun fact: fox urine is sometimes sprayed on trees to prevent them from being illegally cut down for Christmas. Source: <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2015/12/fox-urine-stops-christmas-tree-theft/>)

As mentioned, foxes are extremely territorial. They mark their territory (which includes food, water, toys, bed, etc) by pooping or peeing on an item. Their water should be changed regularly since they pee in it. If you keep them inside

(which we do NOT recommend), they will pee on your furniture, your bed, carpet, etc. The smell is nearly impossible to remove from fabric. Foxes also have a musky odor apart from their excrement, which is also very comparable to a skunk or ferret. Unfortunately, pet foxes are sold at 4 weeks. Besides being much too young to be separated from their mothers, these babies have not yet matured and don't stink, so it's easy for potential buyers to think that they are getting a stink-free fox. Around 3-6 months, when they start to mature, they will develop the unpleasant odor that they will have the rest of their lives.

Even though they are distantly related, foxes are NOT dogs! They are smart, but not trainable, more similar to a cat than a dog. They can learn commands, but they just don't care about following them. While you can walk them on a leash, they will pull, they will stop every 5 seconds to smell something, and they won't walk in a straight line.

Diet is another important consideration. You can't go to the pet store and buy a bag of fox food, and dog food will make them sick. Foxes require a varied diet of cooked or raw chicken, fish, eggs, rice, fruits and vegetables. When Max, our arctic fox, came to us, he had only been fed dog food, had severe diarrhea and was very thin and malnourished as a result. Feeding a fox is a lot more complicated than putting some food in bowl and calling it good. In addition, other wild animals (like squirrels) should not be fed to a pet fox, since they can transfer disease and parasites that a captive animal will have no defense against. Foxes will bury uneaten food (and bowls) which then spoils, so enclosures need to be cleaned out regularly. If a fox eats rotten food they can get sick.

Like most wild animals who don't know when their next meal is coming, foxes are instinctually very aggressive around food. If you get near a fox that is eating, it will bite you. Even Max, who is very sweet and cuddly with his caretaker, will growl and snap at her if she gets close to his food, even right after she gave it to him! It resembles an extreme form of food aggression sometimes seen in dogs. For this reason, it is a terrible idea to keep a fox around kids. Children aren't going to understand when the fox needs to be left alone, and someone is going to get hurt. By law, if a fox bites someone, it has to be euthanized. Period.



^ Max the arctic fox at intake, scrawny and sickly



^ After 6 months on a proper diet, Max was happy and healthy

Foxes need a large, escape-proof outdoor cage. There needs to be strong horse wire or double chain link on every side, including top and bottom. Foxes are escape artists, and very good at climbing and digging. Chicken wire is not sufficient and they can tear it easily. In his previous home, Max the arctic fox would escape on a daily basis. Being tame, he does not hesitate to approach other people's houses, and is lucky a fearful homeowner didn't shoot him. Fox enclosures need to have enough space to run, climb, and dig. Foxes are curious, social and smart and need to be kept mentally occupied. That means lots of toys and time spent playing, or the fox could get depressed. A

depressed fox will start to act out, becoming destructive and aggressive. Also NOTE: No matter how large the cage is, your fox is still acutely aware that he is in a cage. And a wild animal in a cage is never as happy as they would be out in the wild.

Foxes can be extremely loud. They have several different vocalizations, none of which sound dog-like. Max's voice has been compared to a chimpanzee, a bird, and a pig. Your neighbors might hate you if you get a fox.

Foxes will kill smaller animals, especially prey animals like ducks and chickens. They will also be a danger to other pets like cats, rabbits, birds and small dogs.



## FOX FAQs

**Can I feed my fox dog food?** No, at least not entirely. Foxes cannot be fed any food that contains beef or pork, which is found in many commercial foods. They can occasionally be fed high-quality chicken-, fish- or turkey-based foods, but too much processed food usually gives them diarrhea. Our foxes don't get pellet food more than twice a week.

**Can I take my fox on a walk, like a dog?** No. While some foxes will tolerate a harness, some will not. Also a fox has no interest in walking down the sidewalk in a straight line; they want to explore their territory and will stop to smell every new thing thoroughly for several minutes, and then pee on it. You aren't going to get very far walking a fox. NOTE: If you have one of the species that you need a permit for (a red or grey fox), you may not be legally able to take him off your property.

**Can I train my fox to do tricks?** Foxes are just as easy to train as cats. You aren't going to make them do anything they don't want to.

**Can a fox be litter trained?** No. Foxes are wild animals and are highly territorial. They will repeatedly mark the borders of their territory with urine and feces. If you give them a litterbox, they may go in it sometimes (they are essentially marking it as theirs), but they will also pee on their toys, beds, food and water dishes, rugs, walls, and you if they like you enough. As mentioned above, foxes smell disgusting, and their urine holds the strongest smell. If you get peed on in their excitement to see you, you are going to have a very hard time getting the smell off your hands (Speaking from experience here. Undiluted bleach does the trick but you may burn your skin off in the process. You won't mind though, that's how bad it smells.)

**Can a fox be descented, like a skunk?** No. Unlike skunks, which hold their foul odor in their anal glands, foxes secrete their scent from tiny glands all over their body, like human sweat glands. It would be impossible to remove them without completely skinning them. Please note that this smell doesn't develop until after the fox is several months old. The sweet little babies that are sold don't smell now, but they will.

**Can I keep my fox indoors?** It's possible, but we wouldn't recommend it. I can't say enough how disgusting foxes smell. In an outdoor enclosure you are at least not trapped in it, but indoors it is something else. Also, as noted above, they can't be litter-trained and will pee and poop everywhere. They are wild animals who LOVE to dig, and that means they will dig up your carpet, rip open furniture and pillows, etc. IF you decide to keep your fox inside, be VERY careful about providing adequate enrichment to keep them from becoming bored. A bored fox is a destructive fox.

**Can foxes be kept with other animals?** Not unless those animals are much larger than the fox. Foxes are predators, and no matter how "friendly" yours seems around people, it will always enthusiastically chase and kill prey. Anything smaller than a fox could be killed. Unlike many wild animals, foxes do not only kill when they are hungry; they will kill for fun, and it's their favorite game. After watching many stuffed animals get disemboweled and accidentally losing some ducks and geese that got too close to a fox enclosure, we can confidently confirm that the instinct to kill doesn't fade in captive foxes.

**Can foxes be kept together?/I want to get my fox a friend.** We do not recommend keeping foxes together. While each species of fox is different, in the wild they are usually solitary animals and do not like sharing their territory. Some sanctuaries and zoos have been able to keep groups of foxes together in VERY large enclosures after a careful introduction, but unless you are an expert in their behavior and body language you should not try it. One or both foxes could end up very seriously wounded or killed before you have time to separate them. Also, foxes become very aggressive around food, instinctually protecting it from others who may want to steal it. Feeding time could lead to fights and injuries. Don't risk it.

**I just got a fox; can I invite my friends over to play with him?** Foxes do not like strangers. Your fox will be terrified and will hide the entire time, and if you force him out of hiding he will bite someone in self-defense. You are asking for trouble. If you want a fox so you can show him off, you are more concerned with your vanity than his well-being and you should definitely not have one. If/when your fox bites someone, he will have to be euthanized and tested for rabies, by law.