

THE ARCTIC FOX

BEHAVIOR

ADAPTATIONS

HABITAT

TAXONOMY

STATUS

**COMMON NAME**

Arctic foxes

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Vulpes lagopus

TYPE

Mammals

DIET

Omnivore

GROUP NAME

Skulk, leash

AVERAGE LIFE SPAN IN THE WILD

3 to 6 years

BODY SIZE

18 to 26.75 inches;

TAIL LENGTH

up to 13.75 inches

WEIGHT

6.5 to 17 pounds

The Arctic fox, also known as the white fox, polar fox, or snow fox, is a small fox native to the Arctic regions of the Northern Hemisphere and common throughout the Arctic tundra biome. It is well adapted to living in cold environments, and is best known for its thick, warm fur that is also used as camouflage. It has a large and very fluffy tail. In the wild, most individuals do not live past their first year but some exceptional ones survive up to 11 years. Its body length ranges from 46 to 68 cm, with a generally rounded body shape to minimize the escape of body heat.

The Arctic fox is an incredibly hardy animal that can survive frigid Arctic temperatures as low as -58°F in the treeless lands where it makes its home. It has furry soles, short ears, and a short muzzle—all-important adaptations to the chilly clime. Arctic foxes live in burrows, and in a blizzard they may tunnel into the snow to create shelter.

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BEHAVIOR

Arctic foxes must endure a temperature difference of up to 90–100 °C between the external environment and their internal core temperature. To prevent heat loss, the Arctic fox curls up tightly tucking its legs and head under its body and behind its furry tail. This position gives the fox the smallest surface area to volume ratio and protects the least insulated areas. Arctic foxes also stay warm by getting out of the wind and residing in their dens. Although the Arctic foxes are active year-round and do not hibernate, they attempt to preserve fat by reducing their locomotor activity. They build up their fat reserves in the autumn, sometimes increasing their body weight by more than 50%. This provides greater insulation during the winter and a source of energy when food is scarce.

In the spring, the Arctic fox's attention switches to reproduction and a home for their potential offspring. They live in large dens in frost-free, slightly raised ground. These are complex systems of tunnels covering as much as 1,000 m² and are often in eskers, long ridges of sedimentary material deposited in formerly glaciated regions. These dens may be in existence for many decades and are used by many generations of foxes.

Breeding usually takes place in April and May, and the gestation period is about 52 days. Litters may contain as many as 25 (the largest litter size in the order Carnivora). The young emerge from the den when 3 to 4 weeks old and are weaned by 9 weeks of age.

Arctic foxes generally eat any small animal they can find, including lemmings, voles, other rodents, hares, birds, eggs, fish, and carrion. They scavenge on carcasses left by larger predators such as wolves and polar bears, and in times of scarcity also eat their feces. Arctic foxes survive harsh winters and food scarcity by either hoarding food or storing body fat. Fat is deposited subcutaneously and viscerally in Arctic foxes.

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