# Sly as a *Vulpes vulpes*

Story By Rachel D. Mahan
Photo By Adele Hodde

The red fox has a reputation: He's sly. He's cunning. He can sometimes out-fox the hounds and hunters. But all of his artfulness is no match for Brer Rabbit's quick-thinking in a sticky situation.

As the most widely distributed wild carnivore in the world, red foxes have earned their place in folklore and legend. Their fame could be attributable to well-developed senses: Red foxes can locate the low-frequency rustling of a mouse, their prey, within one degree of its location. Some people say they inspire so much interest because of their foxy good looks: they often wear an "ember-red" coat with black leggings and a white-tipped tail.

Red foxes communicate using urine and vocalizations. Although usually solitary, they form partnerships to raise one to 10 pups, or kits, in dens that can be used year after year. Parents try to keep up with cleaning, but the entrances to dens can be littered with droppings and bones of small mammals, birds and carrion.

Even small invertebrates and fruits (possibly the fabled sour grapes) make up their diet, and any leftovers are cached under leaves or snow. To capture small rodents, they jump as high as 6 feet into the air and pin prey with their forelimbs.

Although red foxes are small—only about 3 and a half feet long and 8 to 15 pounds—they use their tails for balance and can run up to 30 miles per hour. Their range covers all of Illinois, and their preference is for grasslands near forest edges. However, they increasingly call the city "home," where rabbits and rodents are abundant.

**Although present throughout the state—including cities—the ember-furred red fox is a rare sight due to its nocturnal lifestyle.**

The red fox: always foxy, sometimes able to out-fox, and ever the muse for a species that sees itself reflected in that ember-red fur.

Rachel D. Mahan is a senior at the University of Missouri-Columbia, pursuing degrees in both biology and English with an emphasis in nonfiction creative writing. She's also conducted research on the gray treefrog, a common frog that visits back-porch lights (for their 'bug buffets') in the summer.