

Friendly Foxes

by Pat Murphy

Today, the dog is known as man's best friend. But thousands and thousands of years ago, the ancestors of today's dogs were wild, wolf-like animals. No one knows exactly how people tamed these wolf-dogs.

In 1959, a scientist in Russia wondered if he could start with a different wild animal and end up with an animal that's as tame as a dog. So he set up an experiment at a farm in Siberia where wild foxes were raised for their fur.

When the experiment started, the foxes at the farm were wild animals. Most of them avoided people and snapped at anyone who tried to pet them.

The scientists tested the foxes, feeding the animals by hand and trying to pet them. The scientists found some foxes that did not bite or run away. These foxes were a little bit tamer and friendlier than the others.

The scientists let these friendly foxes have puppies. Then they repeated their tests with the puppies, looking for the friendliest puppies. When those friendly puppies grew up, the experimenters let those foxes have puppies.

The experimenters repeated this over and over again—finding the friendliest foxes, letting those foxes have puppies, and testing the puppies. Today, most of the foxes from this experiment are as friendly as dogs. They seek out people. They enjoy being petted. They even wag their tails like dogs.

The scientists chose foxes that were friendly, but the foxes changed in other ways as well. The friendly foxes have white fur in places that wild foxes didn't. Many have a star-shaped white patch on their faces, like some dogs.

Experimenters continue to study the friendly foxes. Some friendly Siberian foxes have been adopted as pets. Could the fox be man's new best friend?