

Living with Urban Foxes

Advisory booklet produced by Bristol City Council and adopted by the CIEH

Are you troubled by foxes?

Foxes in an urban area can cause a range of reactions amongst residents; some loathe them, others love them.

The aim of this booklet is to explain the types of problems that can be caused by urban foxes; put the extent of the problem into perspective; and give some practical advice on how to alleviate or possibly eliminate any such problems. You can then decide on how much time and energy you wish to invest relative to the scale of the problem.

Most technical information about urban foxes has been provided by Professor Stephen Harris of the University of Bristol, where most of his research has been carried out on urban foxes.

The history of urban foxes

Foxes first colonised our cities in the 1930s. At that time, land was cheap and large areas of semi-detached suburbs were built in the period leading up to World War II. This low density housing, with relatively large gardens, provided an ideal habitat for foxes and they quickly increased in numbers. From these new suburbs, foxes then colonised other, less favourable urban areas.

Most cities in southern England also have urban foxes, as do a few cities further north. For most towns and cities the fox population reached its carrying capacity (ie: the maximum number of animals the habitat will sustain) many years ago and contrary to popular belief, the population is stable, with no significant increases or decreases. There are only a few cities where fox numbers are probably still increasing and these are ones that have only recently been colonised.

Are urban foxes different from rural foxes?

No. Not only are they the same species, they are very often the same animals. Contrary to popular belief, urban foxes are no less healthy, smaller, more mangy (see section entitled "Do urban foxes get mange?") or any less fit than rural foxes.

Can local authorities control foxes ?

Controlling urban foxes is difficult, expensive and never successful. In the past, a number of local authorities tried this, particularly in London but most have now given up any form of fox control. The problem is that foxes have been in urban areas for so long that they have reached a state of equilibrium and regulate the size of their own population. A large proportion of the foxes do not breed each year and litter sizes (average just under five) are comparatively small.

The moment you increase the mortality rate, the foxes compensate by increasing the number of vixens that breed. So you do not reduce the number of foxes in the area. What you do achieve, however, is a

disruption of the fox population, so that new foxes move in to try to take over the territory of the animal that has been killed. Invariably more than one fox moves in; there are fights over the territory and hence more noise and fouling of gardens. This is because calling and scent marking with both urine and faeces are used to lay claim to a territory. On top of this, having more itinerant foxes in an area is likely to lead to more killing of pets and more general nuisance.

Not only is urban fox control unlikely to achieve anything, it is both difficult and very expensive. Shooting is obviously not acceptable in urban areas, as is snaring and so only live trapping is left. The fox's reputation for cunning is well earned; it is very difficult to get one to walk into a cage trap, even if there is a really tasty delicacy inside. Catching the first fox may take three weeks or longer. However, foxes live in family groups, with an average size of about three adults and four or five cubs. Catching the second fox is harder still and it is virtually impossible to catch them all. Long before you get near this goal, new foxes are moving in to colonise the vacant niche.

So at best, only a very temporary reduction in the number of foxes is achieved for a considerable expenditure of time and effort.

Why can't the foxes be caught and "returned to the countryside where they belong"?

There are a number of reasons to consider. Firstly, there are exactly the same practical problems as with catching the foxes to kill them. It is just not feasible.

Secondly, it is a widely held misconception that foxes belong in the countryside but not in urban areas. Foxes are very adaptable animals and the same species are found in all habitats from the Arctic to desert regions. The English countryside is no more its "proper" habitat than any other; urban areas are just one more habitat colonised by this very adaptable species and they "belong" there just as much as anywhere else.

Thirdly, it is also a misconception that you can move a wild animal to a new area, release it and it will instantly settle down and live happily ever after. Nature just isn't like that and releasing animals in a new area is a very tricky operation. It is unlikely that there will be a vacant territory and the animal will therefore wander widely in a strange area looking for somewhere to live. Since it does not know the area, it will not know the danger spots or best feeding sites. Invariably it will die fairly soon and it would have been far more humane to have killed the fox rather than dump it in a strange area.

Since dumping animals like this is clearly inhumane, such action could well be an offence under the Abandonment of Animals Act 1960.

Finally, many people do not want foxes released on their land. In this, their concerns are entirely justified; since displaced foxes do not know where to hunt, they are particularly likely to cause greater problems to farmers by killing fowl.

Will foxes kill my cat?

This is very rare; a survey in northwest Bristol, where foxes were particularly common, showed that they killed 0.7% of the cats each year and these were predominantly young kittens. This means your cat is far more likely to be run over, stray or die from a variety of other causes.

Foxes are only a little bit bigger than a cat (males average about 5.5 kilograms) and are equipped with a set of sharp teeth. Cats have an equally sharp set of teeth, plus some pretty unpleasant sharp claws. If a fox tackles a cat, it risks severe injuries and that is the last thing it wants. Every night a single fox will meet many, perhaps dozens of cats and most encounters are either indifferent or amicable.

Cats and foxes will usually ignore each other. However, some cats are aggressive animals and will go for a fox, sometimes to drive it away from their garden or food bowl. Usually a fox will flee but if this is not practical and particularly if it is cornered, it may defend itself against the cat. Then both animals may be injured.

Finally, although foxes live in family groups and meet up periodically to play or socialise, they hunt alone. So stories of "packs of foxes" roaming the streets killing pet cats are totally fictitious.

Do foxes attack people?

No. There is no confirmed case of this ever happening. They will not attack children or babies left in a pram in a garden.

It is true, however, that foxes seem to be less wary of children and young foxes may actually try to play with children but they will not attack them.

However, if a fox is cornered, it may bite in self-defence. So if you find a fox trapped in an outbuilding or similar situation, do not approach it or try to pick it up. Leave it an escape route and it will be away as soon as it feels safe.

Will foxes kill any other of my pets?

No, providing that you take good care of your pets, the chances are very slim. The same survey in northwest Bristol calculated that 8% of the pets living in cages in the garden (rabbits, guinea pigs, ducks, hens, etc) were killed by foxes each year. Most of the people interviewed, however, commented that for a long while the foxes had left their pets untouched, even though it would have been easy for the foxes to have taken them at any time.

Pet killing is most frequent in the late spring / early summer when the foxes are rearing cubs and a fat pet rabbit is a nice size meal to carry back to the cubs. Do not leave your pets in the garden unsecured at night and make sure that their hutch or shed is solidly built. The hutch or shed should have a secure means of fastening, preferably with a lock that cannot be knocked open. In addition, any wire on the hutch should be strong weld mesh, securely nailed down and not chicken wire, which foxes can bite through.

If you live in an area where foxes frequent your garden, the onus is on you to take these very simple precautions to safeguard your pets.

Do urban foxes have rabies?

No. Rabies was eliminated from this country in the early part of the 19th century and Britain is currently one of only a few countries without rabies.

Our quarantine laws are designed to keep rabies out and it will only reach Britain if someone smuggles in an infected animal.

If that happens, there are well prepared contingency plans to prevent the disease becoming established in Britain.

Will foxes rifle my dustbin?

They will but much less frequently than most people suppose. That same survey in northwest Bristol found that 81% of the residents never suffered this nuisance, 16% occasionally did but only 3% found this a regular problem. Even this figure is probably an overestimate, since many cases of rifling dustbins are wrongly attributed to foxes; cats and dogs do it very regularly and perhaps more frequently than foxes. If you do suffer from foxes turning out your dustbin, the solution is easy. Buy an elasticised strap with a hook at each end (they are available from garages or motorists' accessory shops), put it through the dustbin lid and hook it over the handle on each side. That cures the problem, whether it is due to foxes, cats or dogs, very quickly and simply.

If you suffer from having your dustbin sacks ripped open on the night you put them out for collection, then you have no alternative except to put them out the following morning. If you leave a plastic bag full of tasty food remains sitting on the pavement overnight, you cannot be too surprised if some passing animal is tempted to tuck in.

Should I feed the foxes?

If you want to, yes; there is absolutely no reason why you should not feed them and many people derive a great deal of pleasure from feeding the foxes in their garden. But do not feel that you have to feed them because otherwise they will be short of food. This is not true.

For instance, some people believe that wheelie bins are stopping foxes feeding from bins and as a consequence they are starving. Since foxes rarely scavenge from dustbins, the introduction of wheelie bins is hardly likely to be a problem.

Other people believe that foxes are particularly short of food in the winter and so need feeding. Again this is a fallacy, as winter poses no problem for foxes.

If you decide to feed your foxes, resist the urge to make them too tame. Urban foxes already are pretty tolerant of humans and show none of the natural fear of rural foxes. This means that it is

comparatively easy to get the foxes to come and take food from your hand or even come indoors to be fed. One person even had a fox that would come indoors, sit on her lap and allow itself to be stroked.

This often causes great problems, both for the fox and for other local residents. The fox assumes that all people will react in the same way and may approach people for food who are either scared of it or likely to be aggressive towards the fox. Sometimes these very tame foxes enter houses through cat-flaps in search of food, much to the consternation of the householder and the cat. If the fox panics and cannot find its way out quickly, bedlam ensues and great damage can be caused in the kitchen.

A new development to the traditional cat-flap is now available that reacts to a device carried on your cat's collar, so that the flap will only allow your cat entry, thereby preventing dogs, foxes or other cats entering your house.

Finally, some people are afraid of foxes and to be approached by an apparently fearless wild animal causes them a great deal of distress.

So avoid making your fox too tame or too bold.

Can I stop the foxes making those awful screaming noises?

Unfortunately no. Foxes live in family groups that defend a joint territory but since they normally spend much of the time travelling around the territory alone, they use calls to maintain contact with other members of the family group and to warn off intruders. Although foxes vocalise throughout the year, their calls are most obvious during the mating season, around January and February. It is then their barks and screams are most likely to be heard; fortunately the calls are usually short-lived and things quieten down fairly quickly.

Do urban foxes get mange?

In some cities, yes. Mange is caused by the itch mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*, which burrows into the skin. Exactly the same mite causes mange in dogs and scabies in humans. In some rural and urban areas, mange is currently prevalent in foxes; it is very virulent and infected animals invariably die.

People often see foxes that look very thin and with their fur coming out in great tufts, so that they look almost hairless. In fact it is very different and a normal course of events.

Foxes moult once a year; this starts around April and they lose much of their fur, so they look extremely thin and scruffy. Often only the grey underfur is left, so that they have large grey patches on the shoulders or flanks.

The new winter coat grows throughout the summer and this process is usually only completed in September or October.

Can I stop the foxes stealing objects from my garden?

Foxes are both inquisitive and very playful like dogs. This means they are not only scent mark objects that interest them but are also quite likely to play with or chew them.

Gardening shoes, gardening gloves, anything made of leather, balls left in the garden, dog chews and other pet toys and clothes hanging on washing lines are all played with, chewed or in the late spring / early summer, removed to take back to the earth for the cubs to play with.

The only recourse is to ensure that you do not leave such items in your garden overnight if foxes frequent the area.

Why do foxes foul my garden?

Foxes use faeces to mark their territory; that is why the faeces are always left in conspicuous places, eg: on top of a compost heap or on garden walls. Excessive fouling is often due to immature foxes attempting to create their territories or where several foxes are competing for a vacant territory.

Once a fox has established a route through your garden, it can be very difficult to stop it. An adult fox can pass through a hole 4" (10cm) square and can scale a 6ft (2m) fence or wall with ease.

It is extremely difficult to stop foxes passing through your garden. Any measures taken are best carried out during late summer and autumn. This is the time that cubs become more adventurous, the family groups are starting to break up and the foxes are endeavouring to establish new territories.

It is rare for this nuisance to be anything more than occasional and although fox faeces are very smelly, they pose little disease risk. Foxes are prone to many of the same diseases and parasites as domestic dogs, including the roundworm *Toxocara canis*, the larvae of which can cause blindness in children. However, the chance of catching this from foxes is remote and so far there are no known cases of children contracting toxocarasis from foxes.

Can I stop foxes digging up my lawn?

Yes, this is comparatively easy. Foxes dig shallow holes in lawns, bowling greens or playing fields when they are hunting for earthworms and grubs; they eat a large number of cutworms (the caterpillars of moths) and beetle larvae, such as wireworms. These only come near the surface of the lawn in wet periods and so this sort of damage is seasonal. It occurs mainly in wet springs and warm wet autumns.

If the damage is not too severe you can ignore it and it will cease as soon as the weather changes. You can then repair the lawn. Otherwise, you can remove the grubs and earthworms in the lawn using a commercially available insecticide and vermicide available from garden centres and DIY stores. This course of action should only be considered in extreme circumstances, due to the need to reduce the use of all pesticides in the environment.

Very occasionally, foxes dig much deeper holes in lawns or bowling greens. These can sometimes be half a metre or more deep and the lawn looks like a battlefield. This usually occurs when a blood or bone-based fertiliser has been applied to the lawn. The foxes think there is a corpse and being scavengers, frantically dig to find it. All you can do is wait for the rain to wash the fertiliser deeper so

that they cannot smell it, or if it is a bowling green or similar area, fence it against the foxes with a small electric fence.

This may sound like a drastic resort but in fact is fairly cheap and easy. All you need is a length of rabbit or sheep "flexinet" and an energiser, which can be run off a 12-volt car battery. They are obtainable from any agricultural merchant - look in the "Yellow Pages". An electric fence can also be used when foxes persistently damage fruit or vegetable gardens.

However, remember that you must clearly label the electric fence, even if it is on private property and must not erect it in an area with public access. You are responsible for the safety of the fence you put up.

This type of fence is likely to cost £100 and so is only really appropriate for extremely sensitive areas such as bowling greens.

Why do foxes dig burrows in my garden?

This is difficult to answer. Foxes are always exploring and often dig trial burrow systems in a variety of unusual places. Flower beds, compost heaps, under garages or under garden paths are all favoured sites.

Often these burrows are less than a metre long and are never used. However, they are a nuisance.

As soon as you spot such a hole, get a bamboo pole and poke it down the hole to the end to check there is no animal in it. Invariably there will not be. Then fill the hole with bricks or something that is difficult for the foxes to dig out and cover it with soil.

Frequently, perhaps inevitably the foxes will try to open it up again but after a few re-blockings, they will give up and go away.

How can I stop fox cubs trampling my garden?

Sometimes fox cubs may be living in an adjacent property but playing in your garden, trampling flower beds, stealing washing off lines, jumping on and breaking cloches or getting entangled in garden netting. Invariably the cubs play very close to their earth and so they will be living a few metres away, under a neighbour's shed or in a patch of rank vegetation.

If they are living in a neighbour's garden, you can ask your neighbour to encourage the foxes to move on. But if your neighbour welcomes the foxes, there is little that you can do, since anyone is perfectly at liberty to encourage foxes to live in their garden. Then all you can do is try to block the access points to your garden so that the cubs play elsewhere.

Sometimes, particularly in late summer, the cubs are coming from a patch of dense vegetation (often brambles) in an adjacent allotment or an overgrown garden. To get the foxes to move, all that has to be done is to clear the area in which they are living.

What can I do about the foxes living under my shed or garage?

Foxes like garden sheds; they provide a nice dry lying up site and an ideal place to breed. Sheds that have proved good breeding sites are used time and again. But it is very easy to stop this.

Foxes do not like sheds that have draughts under them and usually use ones that are in the corner of the garden with a wall or fence on two sides. If there is rubbish piled behind the shed, then so much the better. To deter the foxes, all you have to do is clear the rubbish and open up the area around the shed so that it is exposed and draughty. The foxes will leave pretty quickly, usually the following night.

As soon as they have gone, take steps to prevent them returning. If you have exposed the shed so that it is open all round, this is usually enough. If you want to be absolutely sure that they will not come back, securely fix weld mesh (not chicken wire) around the bottom of the shed, covering the gap and dug about 12 inches (30cm) into the soil.

Foxes breeding under garages are more difficult to get out, since they will have burrowed under a concrete floor. Putting foul-smelling chemicals down the holes is currently illegal under the Food and Environment Protection Act 1985 and often the only way to get them out is to break up the concrete floor of the garage. This is a drastic course of action, particularly since the nuisance value is far less than if they were under the house.

The best course of action is to leave well alone until the foxes take their cubs away; in most years, this happens during June. When you think the foxes have gone, loosely block the holes with some soil. If the holes are re-opened, continue each day until nothing touches the plugs. Then immediately fill the holes with rubble and cement them over to prevent the foxes gaining access again.

In future years, look for new holes and block these in the same way as soon as they appear.

What can I do about the foxes living under my house?

This is a rare but serious problem that must be dealt with immediately. If they can get in under houses, foxes find the nice dry warm environment ideal and often have their cubs in such situations.

It occurs most commonly in older houses, which have large spaces under the floorboard and old metal air vents to provide ventilation. These metal air vents may have rusted away, allowing the foxes easy access. Once in, the space under the floors is divided by walls with small gaps in them to allow air to flow and so this gives the foxes access under the whole house.

The problem is particularly severe in the breeding season and if cubs are born under your house, there are a number of problems. At night the cubs chase each other round and round under the whole house, screaming and wickering at each other.

Not only is the noise unbelievable but under the house is very dry and the dust they kick up permeates everywhere. In addition, they urinate and defecate under the house, so that the smell is awful. To add to this, the vixen brings home food for the cubs; this decomposes, smells and attracts flies. To cap it all, remember that foxes like to chew things and under your house these include gas and water pipes,

electricity and telephone cables. Severe gas leaks, floods, electrical fires and telephone faults have all been caused by foxes.

The most sensible course of action is not to let your air bricks get into a bad state of repair. If the foxes don't take advantage, the local cats will and these can cause very similar problems.

If the foxes have got in, all you can do is arrange for a pest control company to lift the floorboards and drive the foxes out. However, since the foxes probably have access under the whole house, this may well involve lifting floorboard in every room.

Getting the foxes out can be a very time consuming, difficult, disruptive and expensive operation. Maintaining your airbricks is much simpler.

Practical advice

If you are unfortunate to have foxes in your garden, then the following advice can be considered:

- Remove the attraction.
- Habitats.
- Make it unacceptable to the fox.

Remove the attraction

This method can produce the greatest control over the fox population at little or no cost.

Urban fox populations are far greater than those in rural areas, mainly due to the fact that a far greater amount of food is readily available. The most likely reason for a fox to enter your garden is in the search for food, removal of the food source will reduce the attractiveness of your garden to the fox.

Suggestions of action you can take:

1. Keep all domestic refuse in wheelie bins or closed containers, NOT plastic bags.
2. Only put your refuse out on the morning of collection.
3. Protect all animals and livestock.
4. Do not leave food out for other animals, eg: cats, dogs, rabbits, etc. Be extremely careful where you put food to feed birds; this should be in approved containers.

Habitats

Another reason for foxes being attracted to your garden is that it can provide a safe place to shelter by day or night. This may be overgrown or neglected areas or a void beneath a building. Voids can be protected using heavy-duty mesh (weld mesh). Holes measuring 2" (50mm) square are ideal, making sure that it is securely fixed to any building and buried to a depth of 12" (30cm) into the soil to prevent the fox burrowing under the mesh.

Making it unacceptable

If you decide that the presence of foxes in your garden is genuinely unacceptable, then there are ways of discouraging them, although none are foolproof.

To prevent foxes using your garden, you can try a suitable proprietary animal repellent. A range of products are available from garden centres, hardware and DIY stores but please note only approved products can be used and they must be used in accordance with the manufacturers' instructions. The use of non-approved products such as creosote and diesel oil is not permitted by law. The use of these types of non-approved products can be very dangerous to other pets such as cats and dogs. Prosecutions can result against anyone who is found using such products.

Your local garden centre, hardware or DIY store should be able to provide you with the correct advice on the most suitable product to use. **Scoot**, containing aluminium ammonium sulphate, is currently approved for use. Alternatively, you can purchase a scent neutraliser called Cat Off. This product reduces and neutralises the scents left behind by the fox from its faeces or urine.

Please note

Any chemical used as a repellent is covered under The Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 where it states, that only approved chemicals may be used.

All chemicals must be used safely and in accordance with the manufacturers' recommendations.

Further help

If you require further help or advice, you may find a phone call to the Fox Deterrence Helpline 01892 514863 will prove invaluable. Although the Fox Project is a wildlife group, they have developed a wealth of knowledge and expertise on fox deterrence. Their advice will vary according to the time of year and can also be tailored to your own particular situation.

It may be possible to resolve the problem without controlling the foxes. Advice on how to achieve this can be obtained from the following source:

National Fox Welfare Society
135 Higham Road
Rushden
Northants NN10 6DS

Tel: 01933 411996
Fax: 01933 397324

Email: martin@nfws.org.uk Web site: www.nfws.org.uk

CIEH, January 2002