



## URBAN FOXES

### A Guidance note for Living with Foxes

#### **The Great Opportunist**

Foxes started to colonise urban areas after World War I as cities began to grow and expand. They have been very successful in this adaptation taking full advantage of the opportunities urban areas present. They have been so successful in fact that there are often more foxes present in our cities than the surrounding countryside. There are more opportunities for food and shelter in towns following the destruction of woods and hedgerows.

Foxes are scavengers and will eat practically anything. Their diet includes worms, beetles, berries, carrion, mice, rabbits and birds. They also find plenty of food from rubbish, compost heaps and bird tables.

Foxes tend to live in small family groups, especially during the breeding season. A family will consist of a dog fox and a vixen producing one litter of about 4 cubs each year. Only fox pairs with an established territory will breed, so fox numbers are limited by both availability of food and the amount of space. It is also common for one or two other vixens to help raise the family – usually a daughter or sister of the breeding vixen. A family will have an established territory, which they will hunt throughout and mark regularly to protect it.

Foxes spend much of their time resting in an "earth". During the breeding season, young fox cubs live in the earth until they are old enough to start exploring the outside world. In the countryside, earths are usually in small tunnels hidden away among fallen trees or the banks of hedges. In London, fox earth's can be found under sheds, in cellars or any other quiet place.

If you have foxes using your shed or cellar as an earth, you must be very careful if you want to deter them. This is because you could disturb the young foxes that may be living there. It is probably safer to attempt this between September and December outside the breeding season.

#### **Problems Associated with Foxes**

##### **Noise**

Foxes can make quite a loud and unearthly noise. This usually only occurs at two times of year, for a short period in the autumn when the juveniles are dispersing to set up their own territory and between December and February during the mating season. The males have a sort of triple bark and the vixens do the screaming.

##### **Mess and Smells**

As well as barking and screaming, foxes communicate with each other using scents. They produce strong smelling urine and faeces to mark their territories. You may

occasionally find that a fox is visiting your garden and leaving a smelly message behind! If your garden is very important for a fox, it is likely to mark the area with strong smells very regularly in order to mark out its territory.

Foxes are blamed for ripping open plastic bin liners and overturning dustbins. While foxes will scavenge from almost everywhere, it should be remembered that domestic cats and rats have very similar habits and may be to blame for causing a mess. While the introduction of wheely-bins has reduced the problem in some areas, the easiest way to solve it to make sure that you have a dustbin that can be securely closed.

### **Pets**

It is extremely rare for a fox to attack a cat. Most of the time they simply ignore each other. Remember that foxes are really quite small and they pose no threat to dogs. Foxes' natural prey includes small birds and mammals, so they will eat pet rabbits, guinea pigs or chickens given the chance.

The best way to protect rabbits, chickens and other small pets is to make sure they are kept in secure hutches or enclosures. It is also essential to prevent a fox from digging its way into the enclosure. A simple way of doing this is to lay rabbit proof wire underneath the enclosure. Do not use chicken wire as foxes can bite through it. Foxes are opportunists and essentially lazy, if they see an easy meal they will take it.

### **Damage to gardens**

Foxes will sometimes dig up lawns searching for earthworms. They will also root around beds where fish blood and bone meal has been put down, confusing it with buried food. The choice is either to tolerate the damage or use repellents to deter the foxes (see below), or use an alternative fertiliser.

### **Children**

People are often concerned for the safety of their children. Foxes are very wary creatures and will generally shy away from humans. Attacks on children are extremely rare and usually result from a fox being cornered. It may then bite in order to escape. Foxes are most active at night so the time you are most likely to encounter them will be dawn and dusk. It is rare for foxes to venture indoors, but juveniles will sometimes come in if they see an open door and a bowl of pet food on hand, an easy meal. Never try to corner a fox or to pick it up.

### **Disease**

Many dogs and foxes carry sarcoptic mange mites, which cause characteristic bald patches, usually originating at the base of the tail. This is canine mange, which cannot harm cats or humans. Affected animals can be treated by medication in food. The mange mite can survive off its natural victims for a considerable period, so physical removal of infected animals will not create a mange free environment. Mange can infect dogs but is easily treated and in practice is rarely caught by dogs. Foxes do not carry diseases that can be spread to humans. Foxes do not carry the dog disease distemper. They can carry Weils disease, against which dogs can be vaccinated. Like dogs they can host the parasite *Toxocara canis*. However, unlike dogs foxes rarely host the parasite.

### **Feeding foxes**

Some people love to feed foxes in order to attract them into their garden. Due to man's carelessness there is plenty of food available to foxes; even in winter they do not go short of food. Leaving food out does however, help pests like rodents and these are far

more of a problem for human beings. Feeding foxes can also make them braver and less cautious of people, which may then bring them into conflict with humans. We do not therefore recommend that people feed foxes.

## **Relocating Foxes**

People often think that foxes belong in the countryside and that they should be moved “back where they belong”. Foxes are naturally found in both urban and rural areas. However, because foxes are territorial, they rarely survive in new “strange” areas. This also causes problems for foxes already present in that area. Such action could be an offence under the Abandonment of Animals Act 1960, which makes it an offence for any person having charge or control of any animal, to abandon the animal, permanently or otherwise, without reasonable cause, in circumstances likely to cause the animal unnecessary suffering.

## **Deterring Foxes**

The hazards which foxes pose to people are very small indeed and the nuisance they may cause is usually short lived. Islington Council believes that foxes are an important part of the city's ecology and should wherever possible be tolerated instead of persecuted. Islington does not therefore offer a fox eradication service. Foxes very rarely spread any diseases and live largely in harmony with man. They also help to control pests by preying on rats, mice and pigeons. Foxes are protected and it is illegal to gas or poison them and most forms of snaring are also illegal. The blocking of occupied earth's is also illegal. Culling is completely ineffective as other foxes would soon occupy the vacated territory and this would lead to increased breeding. If it becomes necessary to deter them from an area, we recommend the following humane and effective actions:

1. Make sure it really is foxes that are causing the problem - domestic pets or other animals such as rats could be responsible.
2. Remove possible sources of food - such as scraps from compost heaps, fallen food from bird tables or plastic bin liners full of kitchen waste. If this is not possible, make sure that foxes cannot reach the food by building some sort of barrier.
3. Make sure that small pets and chickens are housed in strong hutches or enclosures and that foxes cannot dig their way in.
4. If foxes are visiting your vegetable patch, fence off their favourite food with netting and place chicken wire just under the soil to protect bulbs.
5. If foxes have made a home in your garden use strong smelling repellents and then carefully block access to their earth. First of all place a strong smelling repellent around the entrance to the earth. After a few days, lightly block the entrance with soil, so that the vixen can dig out and remove any young foxes that might be living there. Once you are sure that foxes are no longer using the earth, you can block it up more securely. Foxes usually leave their dens in June.
6. Discourage foxes from gaining access to your garden by making sure fences do not have any gaps.
7. You can deter foxes with strong smells such as the repellents used to deter dogs and cats.

## **Repellents**

There are a number of repellents on the market, they are usually marketed as a cat or dog repellent but they will also work on foxes. They are designed to make the fox think another animal is taking over the territory. Their immediate response will probably be to mark the territory more strongly so the problem will probably worsen initially. Persist and remove any of their faeces. This will slowly break their control over the territory and they will move on.

They are widely available from garden centres and hardware stores. Some makes include:

Scot  
Get off My Garden  
Silent Roar

## **The Fox Code**

The London Wildlife Trust has a Fox Code that the Council supports. It states that:

1. The killing, trapping and transportation of foxes should never be undertaken to solve a nuisance. This is cruel and will usually not work since other foxes will quickly take over a vacant territory.
2. Where foxes are causing a serious nuisance, using the types of humane methods described in this guidance to deter but not harm them.
3. We should aim to live in harmony with foxes and other wildlife that shares our city and celebrate the fact that foxes have adapted to urban life.

## **Further Information**

If you require further information or need more help then contact either:

Nature Conservation Team: 020 7354 5162

Animal Welfare Officer: 020 7527 3222

The Fox Project also runs problem solving advice lines:

- Fox Deterrence (Pre Recorded Advice Line): 01892 826 222
- Mobile Ambulance 07778 909 092
- Fox Project (Head Office) 01892 824 111