

# Living with urban foxes



# 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.

Much of the 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 1930's. 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, and are now found in all parts of Bristol right down to the city centre. However, they are still most abundant in those parts of the city with owner-occupied 1930's semi-detached or detached housing. In such areas foxes attain densities several times those seen in rural areas.

Whilst Bristol's urban foxes are well known as a result of the publicity given to them by the BBC's Natural History Unit, most cities in southern England also have urban foxes, as do a few cities further north. For most towns and cities, including Bristol, the fox population reached its carrying capacity (i.e. 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, which 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. The number of fox cubs born in Bristol exceeds slightly the annual rate of mortality, and excess animals disperse out of the city, sometimes moving distances of up to 25 kilometres (15 miles).**

For instance, foxes born in Bristol have moved as far as Cheddar Gorge and other sites on the top of the Mendips;

it is difficult to imagine a bigger change in life-style. Other foxes live outside the city but commute into the edges to feed at night.

Not only is there no difference between rural and urban foxes but also contrary to popular belief, urban foxes are no less healthy, smaller, more mangy (*see page 7*) or less fit than rural foxes.

# Why is there no fox control in Bristol?

**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. At present there is an annual mortality rate of 50% per annum for Bristol's foxes, mostly as a result of road deaths. This may sound high, but it is actually much lower than the foxes could sustain. So 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, foxes compensate by increasing the number of vixens that breed. So you do not reduce the numbers 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 killings 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 is virtually impossible to catch them at all. Long before you get near this goal new foxes are moving in to colonise the vacant niche.

So at best only a temporary reduction in the number of foxes is achieved for a considerable expenditure of time and effort. The council therefore believes that the policy of positive deterrents will best serve to limit the fox population.

# 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 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 Animal Welfare Act 2006.

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.



## Do foxes attack people?

**Until recently there has been no evidence to suggest that foxes pose a significant risk of attacks on people.**

The incident where two children were attacked in their bedroom has been the first confirmed reported incident. Therefore if you know that foxes are in your area, you should consider some simple precautions. Do not leave windows and doors open making it easy for foxes to enter properties and do not to leave babies in prams unattended. Hand tame foxes that

have been encouraged to enter gardens for feeding could potentially enter properties undetected.

It is true, however, that foxes seem to be less wary of young children, and may actually try to play with them.

However, if a fox is cornered, it may attempt to 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 my cat?

**This is very rare; but can happen occasionally. A survey in northwest Bristol, where foxes were particularly common, showed that they killed 0.7% of the cats each year, and these were predominately 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 bigger than a cat (males average about 5.5 kilograms), and are equipped with a sharp set of 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.



## Will foxes kill any other of my pets?

Unlikely, providing that you take good care of your pets, the chances are very slim but not impossible. The same survey in north-west Bristol calculated that 8% of 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 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 safe guard your pets.



## Do urban foxes have rabies?

**No. Rabies was eliminated from this country in the early part of the 20th 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.

## 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 per 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.

## Should I feed the foxes?

Following advice from Natural England Species Information Note SIN003 Urban Foxes, we do not recommend the feeding of foxes intentionally or unintentionally.

## 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.



## Will foxes rifle my litter bin?

They will, but much less frequently than most people suppose. That same survey in north-west Bristol found that 81% of residents never suffered this nuisance, 16% occasionally did, but only 3% found this to be a regular problem.

Even this figure is probably an over estimate, since many cases of rifling refuse bins are wrong attributed to foxes; cats and dogs do it regularly, and perhaps more frequently than foxes. However, the wheelie and food bins introduced in Bristol will greatly reduce this problem, as they are fox proof.

If you do suffer from foxes turning out your refuse, the solution is easy. Make sure that you do not put out plastic

sacks with waste food inside. Contact the council for a wheelie bin and food caddy on (0117 92 22100), always make sure that the lid is intact and closed at all times, this will ensure that foxes cats, dogs, rats and birds cannot gain access to your waste.

If you still have to use plastic sacks for refuse make sure that you put them out on the morning of the collection and not the night before. If you do leave plastic sacks full of tasty food remains sitting on the pavement overnight you cannot be too surprised if some passing animal (fox, cat, dog, rat, pigeon and gull) are tempted to tuck in.



## Can I stop the foxes stealing objects from my garden?

Foxes are both inquisitive and very playful like dogs. This means they 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, dogs 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 e.g. on top of a compost heap, or in a 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" (100mm) 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/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 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 toxocariasis 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 by 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 to 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 fox with a small electric fence. This may sound like a drastic resort, but in fact is fairly cheap and easy to install. All you need is a length of rabbit or sheep “flexinet” and an energiser, which can be run off of a 12 volt car battery. They are obtainable from any agriculture merchant, look in the Yellow Pages. An electric fence can also be used when foxes persistently damage fruit or vegetables 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 up to £140 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 burrows 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 patch of 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 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 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?

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

Foxes do not like sheds that have draughts under them, and usually only use ones that are in the corner of the garden with a wall or fence on at least two sides. If there is rubbish piled behind the shed, then so much the better. To deter the fox, 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 the base, this is usually enough. If you want to be absolutely sure that the foxes will not return, securely fix strong “weld mesh” (not chicken wire) around the base of the shed, covering the gap and dig about 12 inches (300mm) 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 re-blocking the holes each day until nothing disturbs the soil 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 foxes living under my house?

**This is a rare but serious problem that must be dealt with immediately. If foxes can get under houses, they will 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 floorboards, 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 floor is divided by walls with small gaps in them to allow air to flow, and so this design provides the foxes with access under the whole of the 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 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 making

an awful smell. 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 at things, and under your house these include gas and water pipes, electric cables and telephone cables. Severe gas leaks, floods and electrical fires and telephone faults have all been caused by foxes.

The most sensible course of action is not to let your air vents get into a bad state of repair. If the foxes don't take advantage the local cats or even worse rats will cause similar problems. If the foxes have got in, all you can do is to arrange for a pest control company to lift floorboards and drive the foxes out. However, since the foxes probably have access under the whole house, this may well involve lifting floorboards in all ground floor rooms.

Getting the foxes out can be very time consuming, difficult, disruptive and an expensive operation. Maintaining your air vents is a much, much cheaper option.

# Practical Advice

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

- a) Remove the attraction
- b) Remove the habitats
- c) Make it unacceptable

## Remove The Attraction

This method can produce the greatest control over the fox population at little or no cost. Urban fox population 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 of 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, food bins or closed containers (making sure all lids are properly closed) 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 e.g. cats, dogs, rabbits etc. Be extremely careful where you put food to feed birds, this should always be in approved bird feeders.

## 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, neglected areas or voids beneath buildings.

Voids can be protected using a heavy duty mesh (weld mesh) with holes measuring 2" (50mm) square is ideal, making sure that it is securely fixed to any building and buried to a depth of 12" (300mm) 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 is available from garden centres, hardware stores and DIY stores. Please ensure that **only approved products** are purchased and that they are **used in accordance with the manufactures label**. The law does not permit the use of non-approved products such as creosote or diesel oil. The use of these or any other 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 non-approved products.

Your local garden centre, hardware or DIY store should be able to provide you with the correct advice on the most suitable products to use.

The products listed below are approved for use to deter foxes:

- ✓ Scoot
- ✓ Catapult
- ✓ Ready to use Stay Off
- ✓ Johnson's Clear Off
- ✓ B&Q Animal Repellent
- ✓ Curb Garden Pack

All these products contain aluminium ammonia sulphate.

**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/pesticides must be used safely and in accordance with the product label**

If you require further help or advice, please call the  
**Fox Deterrence Helpline 01892 826 222**

Although the fox project is a wildlife group they have developed a wealth of knowledge and expertise on fox deterrence.

Advice will vary according to the time of year and can also be tailored to your own particular situation.

Also: [www.naturalengland.org.uk](http://www.naturalengland.org.uk)

For further copies of this booklet contact:

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