



City of Westminster

**Information on the Urban Fox
in
City of Westminster**



The Urban Fox

From Country to City

The Urban Fox is a rural problem that man has part enclosed in to towns and cities by massive expansion of housing stocks and industry, following the Great War of 1914-18. It was during the 1930s, Foxes were first noted as being present in these new urban areas. The Red Fox, soon to be known within our cities as the Urban Fox, moved within the interconnection of towns and cities. Another, and even more direct route in to urban areas utilised by foxes are the railway networks. The fox can travel largely unmolested along the prohibited land access of these networks, which are complete with harbourage and abundant wildlife food source. A further route is made via Canal networks which also offer foxes similar advantages to the railway network.

Attempts by then Ministry of Agriculture Farming and Fisheries (MAFF) to cull foxes in urban areas began in the 1940s and continued until the 1970s before finally being abandoned as ineffective and too costly. The urbanisation of the fox over the last 80 years suggests population numbers are not as high as media or pressure groups would imply. Unlike other wild life; such as rabbits and rats which breed unchecked regardless, there is a unique interaction between the Fox and its environment, which has a significant impact on the population of foxes and prevents an outbreak of limitless numbers.

Within the City of Westminster as late as 2000, fox nuisance reports to Westminster City Council Pest Control Team were less than one a year and showed only a slight rise until 2010. A change in attitude towards the Fox occurred following the unfortunate attack on two twin infants in their home during 2010 in Hackney. A vast amount of media coverage continued throughout this period showed no belligerent increase in attacks on humans. To date no reported fox attacks on humans has ever occurred in Westminster. The only known result in Westminster has been an increase in the number of Fox nuisance complaints (which can be multiple reports of the same foxes), most of which is due to the presence and not harm caused by foxes.

There have been many attempts at studying urban foxes, to date the most informative survey has been carried out in the City of Bristol by Bristol University and has largely formed the basis of the City of Bristol response to the problem of the Urban Fox. The result being the City does not deem the Urban Fox to be a pest and does not include the animal in its pest control service beyond offering advice on deterrence. This is the same stance as City of Westminster and nearly all other local authorities after serious consideration and evaluation of the matter.

Opinions

Few wildlife matters in urban areas divide public opinion as the issue of Urban Foxes. Equally polarised are the views of accredited national experts, studies and municipal authorities, in dealing with the problem. Being for or against the Urban Fox depends entirely upon the view point and exposure to the fox by individual members of the public and authority. The main factors of the fox problem can be categorised in simple terms as:

- **Sight**
To some the mere sight of a fox on the highway or public area can be frightening which, is intensified when seen in the garden of one's own dwelling. While others welcome the fox as an enhancement to their environment.
- **Sound**
Foxes are usually only vocal when defending a territory or during the mating season and subsequent period of raising their young. The issue setting them apart from noisy dogs being

the cry of the fox to some, sounds closer to screaming, rather than barking. Few it is assumed, welcome such sound.

- **Activity**

Foxes can be destructive when foraging for food and pose a particular threat to domestic rabbits in pens and chickens in coops. Most common and offensive to nearly all people is the manner in which the fox marks its territory. This is carried out by defecating and or, urinating on lawns, flowerbeds and points of the fox's entry / exit of the garden. The awful sight and foul odour is particularly unpleasant (and may linger some time). The health hazard of which is similar to dog and cat faeces.

The Fox

The Red Fox, (latin name of *Vulpes vulpes*) is common throughout Europe and is mainly a nocturnal creature. In appearance they resemble a dog and are distinctive by their colouring being typically; reddish brown main body with black 'socks', white under belly, inner ears and tip of the tail. Average length is 110 cm from nose to tail and weight of approximately 6.5 kg. The male is called a Dog Fox, the female a Vixen and the young are known as Cubs.

Generally, Foxes mate and produce an average litter of five cubs per Vixen, during late January to early February. It is during this period including December, when they are defending their territory as the mating season approaches, most complaints are received due to their barking. During this period foxes are more visible as they disperse to seek new breeding earths or Dens. From March to June, activity and visibility is minimal as the paired foxes raise their young, the Dog Fox being responsible for feeding the family. The weaning period begins from June and completes by October after which the family unit break up. By November the cycle is near completed, with some foxes remaining in the general area whilst a few ventures further afield.

A Fox could live as long as 14 years in captivity however, studies have found in practice half the numbers of urban foxes produced in a year live to an average age of just over one year and foxes living beyond 3 years are rare. Not all female foxes reproduce, as much as 25% do not and almost uniquely, it has been shown in studies foxes actually regulate birth control to the fecundity of the area they live in. There many factors involved in the short lifespan of a Fox, chief among these is their susceptibility to disease and parasitic mites found in nature. Most common are the [Sarcoptidae](#) family of mites which cause Mange, a terrible skin and immunity damage resulting in a slow and painful death of the infected fox.

Foxes like most animals mark their territories and defend them from foxes outside of their territory. When foxes from an established territory die either from natural causes or from destruction by man, the absence of the previously maintained scent, signals to other foxes it is all clear to move in. In this way the population numbers in a territory remain approximately the same, even though there may have been several generations to have pre-existed within it. Foxes seen in day light hours away from a Den and not showing the normal alert and stealthy predispositions are invariably, sick or dying. Such foxes constantly scratching and have thinning fur usually have Mange, which is fatal to most foxes.

Habitat

The basic requisites for a fox having established a territory is food and harbourage. The fox then creates and marks foraging routes throughout the territory by which it patrols, hunts and attracts a mate. Being highly adaptable, foxes will either construct a shelter by digging a chamber deep into

the ground called an 'Earth' or, live in what is collectively known as a 'Den'. This can be naturally formed structures such as hollowed tree boughs and areas altered by man (for example; under sheds, unoccupied buildings and over grown gardens). Large tracks of land in the City of Westminster are owned by Railway companies, along which are; earth embankments, over grown areas, disused sheds and facilities. These provide a food source of mixed wildlife and Dens for the Urban Fox to thrive.

Food Sources

Where there are people inevitably there is food, edible litter, refuse and food storage. Foxes will take full advantage of human habits as do most animals including dogs, cats and squirrels. Foxes also naturally predate heavily on vermin such as rats and mice (along railways for example, this would include wild rabbits whose numbers would become problematic for humans left unchecked). They also eat the carcasses of animals killed by vehicles on roads. The impact of this has not been studied but, it must be presumed any reduction in vermin in our city, especially by natural predation is of benefit to the human populace.

Threat

Most comparative animals to and including, the Fox pose a threat to man in one form or another and it is the viability of the threat which forms the response from either central government or the local authority. The Fox can be categorised as the vector of disease, actual bodily harm and damage (defined as ranged from crops, foodstuffs, livestock, hedges and earthen banks etc.).

Disease

The threat of Rabies is the most serious disease to the populace of the UK the fox is capable of spreading. However, Rabies was eradicated in the UK in 1903 by the control of *dogs* and not foxes. Strict animal quarantine measures at our borders keep the external threat at bay which, in recent years has significantly declined due to European measures taken to combat it.

Death

No human in the UK from any known record has ever been killed by a Fox.

Bodily Harm

Foxes are predominantly wary of humans, dogs and even adult cats (reliable observation of full grown domestic cats repelling foxes is not uncommon. However, young cats and kittens could be more vulnerable to attack by foxes). Attacks by foxes on humans are extremely rare. This does not mean foxes are to be considered non-aggressive; they are wild animals and behave as such.

Damage

Damage as defined in Agricultural Act 1947 is for rural areas and is not the same in urban areas. No significant examples have arisen in Westminster.

Management of Foxes

The Law implies the Fox is a 'Pest' if its actions contravene at least the Agricultural Act 1947 or Animal Health Act 1981; otherwise it is a 'Nuisance'. The ambiguity of the interpretation places the fox in both categories under certain criteria. This legislation is intended to protect livestock and food products in rural areas and is not directly related to urban areas. An appropriate response by nearly all Local Authorities is to consider the urban fox principally as a nuisance (unless actual bodily harm occurs, which then requires best attempts to capture and destroy the rogue animal).

Management

Viable management of fox nuisance for most complaints are best dealt with by offering advice on preventative means. Foxes are themselves the best form of population management as unlike most animals, foxes actually regulate their own population. Up to 50% of a fox population will not breed once equilibrium is reached in an area; the high mortality rate due to susceptibility to disease and man (mostly by road traffic) also impacts on the overall growth of annual numbers. Deliberate destruction of foxes by man has little to no effect on fox population levels, since a reduction is quickly backfilled by increased birth rates to compensate for the loss. This in turn actually *increases* the nuisance issue as other foxes loudly compete for the vacant territory. It is mainly for this reason nearly all UK local authorities do not pro-actively carry out fox control.

Relocation

A captured fox to be relocated elsewhere requires equal consideration to the welfare of the captured fox (which at best would be poor practice and almost certainly be in breach of the Animal Welfare Act 2006) and the environment it they are to be released into. Ensuring the constant introduction of captured foxes do not destabilise the eco system they are to be released into is not likely to meet with agreement from the Environment Agency. It is also highly unlikely one Local Authority will accept foxes being released on to its land from another authority and the same must be assumed for private landowners. Such agreement would have to run in perpetuity as would the incurred cost.

Destruction

In the event of it being necessary to destroy a Fox it must be done quickly, humanely and cause the absolute minimal distress to the animal. For such purposes City of Westminster only condones the use of caging (ensuring sufficient water and food is present in the cage) and then shooting as quickly as possible by trained and qualified persons, recognised by the City of Westminster. Cages must be inspected daily as a minimal requirement. A caged fox once found is to be despatched within a few hours. In such occurrences the landowner must rigorously apply the **Animal Welfare Act 2006** which requires the humane treatment of the animal. Close coordination with the City of Westminster is required.

Nearly all local authorities consider the cost of destroying foxes prohibitively expensive to the rate payer in exchange for little or no guarantee the target animal is captured and destroyed and absolutely none for the prevention of recurrence.

Law Permitting the Destruction of Foxes

Before control measures can be taken strict adherence to the law must be upheld. Foxes come under several acts of Law which permit and prohibit their destruction, among those permitting their destruction are:

Agriculture Act 1947

This Act enables the destruction of Foxes specific to the prevention of damages to crops, pasture, animal or human foodstuffs, livestock, trees, hedges, banks or any works on land. On private land this is the responsibility of the landowner.

Animal Health Act 1981

This Act enables the destruction of Foxes and strictly applies to the prevention of the spread Rabies, during an actual outbreak only.

Acts Which Prohibit Control Measures are:

Protection of Animals Act 1911, it is illegal to lay poison baits for Foxes (which also poses a serious threat to non-target species including pets).

Control of Pesticides Regulation 1986, makes it illegal to gas Foxes.

Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, prohibits self locking snares and free running snares are to be inspected daily.

Wild Mammals Protection Act 1996, prohibits the cruel treatment of all wild animals. It does however, allow for the legitimate and humane destruction of pests.

Further legislation which must be applied, comes under:

Animal Health Act 1981

Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1991

Hunting Act 2006

Prevention

The following advice forms the principle response by City of Westminster for members of the public experiencing foxes as a problem and need advice on preventative measures that can be taken to significantly reduce and possibly eliminate, fox incursion. Some or all may be required according to the severity of the problem.

Harbourage

The first step in Fox Prevention Management is to deny the fox harbourage. The prerequisite of which is for property and land to be kept in good order and maintenance. This includes:

- Keeping overgrown gardens & derelict land clear of vegetation which could hide from view a Foxes Earth and make early detection possible.
- Remove structures which could provide shelter (large refuse items such as doors propped against a wall, abandoned vehicles etc.).
- Safely seal access to disused out houses and dwellings with missing bricks which could provide access to the internal under-floor area of the dwelling.
- Safely seal bases of garden sheds which do not reach the ground. If in doubt as to whether a fox is present, test this by placing light obstacles such as propping loose twigs around open areas of the shed base perimeter. If after one week the twigs are still in place it is reasonable to assume there is no activity. If still in doubt or foxes are clearly seen or heard, it is advised to wait until the season is over and the den emptied before sealing the shed base.

Route Run Disruption

Although the fox is capable of climbing most garden walls, like most animals it will usually follow the path of least resistance. Place a large and tall enough object in its way and it may be persuaded to go around it. The best way to disrupt access to a dwelling's garden is to erect a fence around the circumference of the garden and ensuring access is gated to the same height. Panels will need to be a minimum of 2 metres high and preferably have smooth non-grip top ridges. Special consideration should be given to gardens where pets in pens and chicken are kept outside, necessitating the fencing to start at least 45cms under the soil to help disrupt access by the fox digging under the fencing. Other forms of fence enhancements can have additional fixing for commercially available, 12 volt low level electrification.

Food Source Denial

Do not leave food sources for the fox, keep pet foods indoors and bird foods in feeders such as squirrel proof feeders and do not throw food scraps on the garden. Use pet flaps with electronic locking systems to prevent opportunistic foxes from entering kitchens following the scent of pet foods. Place food refuse sacks in plastic bins with lids kept closed, such as large 'wheelie bins'.

Repellents

Commercial animal repellents are available but, must be approved for use against Foxes under the Control of Pesticides Regulation 1986 and used according to the manufacturer's specification. Any home-made repellent is also required to meet this specification. Repellents have best effect when there are no other attractions for the fox to be present in the garden such as food or harbourage. The Fox's own droppings need to be cleared and the area disinfected before applying the repellent, in order to confuse the fox the garden does not form part of its run.

Noise Generators

Foxes do not like noise, devices such as the commercially available product 'Scare crow' use heat and movement detection. In addition to noise, it also shoots water, to combine a harmless deterrent both audible and physical.

Self Help and Further Reading

Public reception of the urban Fox is split between people who welcome it and see them as an enhancement to their environment and are legally permitted to the fox's presence on their land. While an opposing preference is for their destruction or removal, from the environment. The City of Westminster view of the Fox being a social nuisance rather than pest does not encourage the active incurrence of Foxes.

A brief list of self help and further reading on the subject is provided below. However, please note City of Westminster does not recommend (except affiliated British Pest Control Association - BPCA) or validate claims made in the texts.

Repellents

The following Repellent products are a few legally permitted and available online or, in many Garden Centres which have either the same or similar line of products.

[Water Scare Crow](#) [Scoot](#) [Stay Off](#) [Get Off My Garden](#) [Wash Off and Get Off](#)

Website (recommended) for contractors dealing with Foxes

www.bpca.org.uk/

Website Information

www.foxolutions.co.uk
www.thefoxwebsite.org
www.electricfence-online.co.uk
www.wildlifeonline.me.uk/red_fox

Website Charity Information

www.rspca.org.uk/allaboutanimals/wildlife/inthewild/foxes
www.foxproject.org.uk/
<http://www.nfws.org.uk/>

Website Fox Study Leaflets

www.salford.gov.uk/livingwithurbanfoxesmay05cieh.pdf
www.bristol.gov.uk/sites/...pest_control/urban-foxes-leaflet.pdf
<http://naturalengland.etraderstores.com/NaturalEnglandShop/UserFiles/Files/sin003.pdf>