The Urban Fox
Background

Foxes, which are a member of the dog family first started to colonise our towns and cities in the 1930s. Attracted by a plentiful supply of food from bins and litter on the streets, the red fox's adaptable and opportunistic nature has made it a very successful urban resident. Research has shown that the fox population of our cities has been stable for many years with no significant increases or decreases in fox numbers. The population is self-regulating according to the availability of habitat and food.

Fox Facts

- Habitat

Foxes prefer suburban areas, with large gardens where they can find shelter beneath shrubbery, sheds, and in other quiet areas, for example, alongside railway tracks or in parks and other open spaces. Foxes usually shelter and breed below ground in an 'earth' or 'den'. They prefer well-drained soil and sometimes use burrows made by rabbits or badgers. In urban areas, they also live underneath sheds and outbuildings.

Foxes do not roam around in packs; they tend to live in family groups comprising one dog (male), a dominant vixen (female) and subordinate vixens which may be the young of the previous year. The group defends a territory located within a larger home range or foraging area which may overlap with that of other groups. Foxes are predominantly nocturnal, but in urban areas the sight of a fox active during the day is not unusual.
Diet

Foxes are opportunistic feeders feeding on a wide range of foodstuffs such as scavenged food scraps, berries, plant bulbs, worms, insects, birds such as feral pigeons, carrion and the occasional small mammal including rats and mice. Up to 50% of their diet is scavenged waste or food deliberately provided by householders. Foxes will bury food surplus to their requirements.

Breeding

Foxes breed once a year, with mating beginning in January when the eerie mating cries can be heard during the night. A litter of 4-5 cubs is born about late March, and the cubs start venturing into the open from late April onwards. By June or July the den will be abandoned, the cubs will be learning to forage for food, and their playful activities will be evident. By early autumn, the cubs will be almost fully grown, and by late autumn the family begins to disperse. Urban fox cubs usually disperse between 2–5 miles from their birthplace. However, 70-80% of fox cubs die before they reach maturity and so never breed.

Life Expectancy

Life for an urban fox is short, with an average lifespan of 2 years. Disease, usually mange, spreads quickly in the towns and cities and infected animals invariably die. Traffic accidents account for over 60% of urban fox deaths.

Communication/ Noise

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. Foxes use 28 different types of calls to communicate with each other. 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.
• Foxes and People

Despite fears, the fox does not pose a danger to people. Foxes are not naturally aggressive to humans, but like all wild animals, they may defend themselves if they feel threatened or cornered. Very few foxes are comfortable with being in close proximity to humans when resting and sleeping and so they have no interest in attempting to shelter within an occupied family home. Foxes may attempt to den underneath a shed, or even a house, but will generally prefer to 'live' in quiet, secluded areas. If you do 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.
Remember - Wild animals should always be treated with respect.

• Foxes and Pets

Foxes will take livestock such as chickens, rabbits and guinea pigs if they are not properly secured, but are unlikely to threaten cats or dogs, all of which are more than a match for an adult fox. If a fox tackles a cat or dog, it risks severe injury 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.

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.

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• Disease

In the UK, there is little or no danger of contracting disease from foxes. The last case of canine rabies in the UK was in 1902, since then the disease has rapidly receded over most of Europe. Neither parvovirus nor distemper has ever been conclusively recorded in UK foxes, and there is virtually no possibility of serious health problems arising from the presence of foxes.
Fox Control and Deterrence

Controlling urban foxes is costly and controversial and never successful. Killing or relocating foxes simply results in less competition and increased breeding success for the remainder. In the past a number of local authorities have tried this, particularly in London, but despite this, foxes continued to thrive. Most have now given up any form of fox control.

It should also be noted that Local Authorities have no legal obligation to cull foxes even if it was successful. Dealing with fox issues is the responsibility of the owner or occupier of the property where the problem occurs.

The Newcastle Approach to Foxes

In common with many other authorities, Newcastle does not support or practice lethal control. It supports coexistence and humane deterrence. Foxes are not vermin; they are part of our urban wildlife. There is no legislation to compel Local Councils to undertake control of foxes. Residents are given advice and encouraged to adopt humane solutions to their fox problems.

Foxes and the law

If you decide to undertake fox control you are advised to employ a professional pest controller who must take into account the following legislation:

- Killing and controlling foxes is restricted under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.
- The Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996 makes it an offence to intentionally inflict unnecessary suffering on any wild mammal.
- There is no poisonous substance authorised for use on foxes.
- It is an offence to set snares for foxes in a situation where a dog, cat or protected animal may be killed or injured.
- It is an offence to use a firearm close to a highway or near inhabited properties.
- The capture of urban foxes and their release into rural areas is also not recommended on welfare grounds and this practice could be an offence under the Animal Welfare Act (2006).
- The use of Gin Traps is banned under the Pests Act 1954.
The Urban Fox Problem?

A fox is a fox and there is no difference between rural and urban foxes. The English countryside is no more the foxes “proper” habitat than any other; urban areas are just one more habitat colonised by this very adaptable species, and they belong here just as much as anywhere else.

It has been shown that the majority of people do like having foxes in their cities. A recent UK survey found 89% of people living in urban areas liked foxes and were in favour of them living in their cities. Also in a survey by The Mammal Society, foxes were voted one of the most popular British mammals.

Prevention of Problems

Newcastle City Council believes that the policy of positive deterrents will best serve to limit the fox population.

i. Remove the Attraction

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:

- Keep all domestic refuse in wheelie bins, food bins or closed containers, making sure all lids are properly closed - NOT plastic bags.
- Only put your refuse out on the morning of collection.
- Protect all animals and livestock. Using strong weld mesh or chain-link wire on hutches and runs will make pets more secure, chicken wire is not sufficient. Bolts are more secure than hook or twist catches and cannot easily be opened by a fox. 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 not leave food out for other animals e.g. cats, dogs, rabbits etc. Only provide food for wild birds on fox-proof (roofed) bird tables or approved bird feeders.

ii. Remove the 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 weld mesh with holes measuring 50mm, ensure that it is securely fixed to any building and buried to a depth of 300mm into the soil to prevent the fox burrowing under the mesh.

Under the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996 it is illegal to block a fox inside its den by filling in the entrance. It is therefore essential that the den is empty before filling in the holes. Placing twigs across each entrance hole in such a way that they would be disturbed if the hole was used can easily check this. Check the sticks daily and when three nights have passed without disturbance you may assume it is safe to fill in the holes. From February to April checks must be made daily for 10 days as a vixen could stay below ground for that length of time if nursing newborn cubs.
iii. Make 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 fool-proof:

- Try a suitably approved proprietary animal repellent. A range of products is available from garden centres, hardware stores and DIY stores. The law does not permit the use of non-approved products (The Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986).

- Deter foxes from the garden by putting up fencing or planting prickly plants around the garden and block access points into your garden.

- Use motion-activated sprinklers, these repel foxes with a short but startling burst of water.

Further Information

More information can be obtained from the following organisations:

Natural England
www.naturalengland.org.uk

Newcastle City Council
Ecology Officer
Tel: 0191 277 7195

‘The Fox Project’
www.foxproject.org.uk
Fox Deterrence Helpline
Tel: 01892 824111

RSPCA
www.rspca.org.uk
Tel: 0300 1234 999

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