RSPCA Wildlife

Living with .... *foxes*

About foxes ....

Red foxes are adaptable animals that live in many different environments across the world from the Arctic tundra to the deserts of North Africa.

Foxes are truly omnivorous, without specialized food requirements, so it is not surprising that they live in many of our towns and cities. However, they are more common in some areas than others. They are most numerous in areas of low-density suburban housing, such as those built in the UK in the 1930s, when land was cheap and houses had large, enclosed gardens. Spaces under garden sheds provide shelter, and food is abundant. Older housing in industrial towns and many modern developments have little open space or only small gardens.

There are many food sources available to foxes in towns. They are not dependent on food from dustbins, although if rubbish is not properly contained they will take anything edible – as do cats, dogs, squirrels and birds. Many people put food out for them, or they scavenge from bird tables or compost heaps and eat large beetles, craneflies ('daddy-long-legs'), earthworms, field voles, small birds, blackberries and windfall apples and pears. Some of these may seem small fare but a warm, wet night can provide hundreds of worms that are easily picked off lawns for a substantial meal.

Foxes occupy and defend their territory – the abundance of food determines how many may live in an area. For example, in a well-studied area of Bristol the number of fox families varied from about two to nearly five per square kilometre. In such areas a fox family comprises the dominant male (dog) and female (vixen) and a litter of cubs. It is also likely to include one or more subordinate animals that may help rear the cubs. In late summer the group may break up, with many of the young foxes moving off to find their own territory.

Each year a large proportion of the population dies. The greatest single cause is traffic accidents, accounting for over 60 per cent of deaths. In the early 1990s there were an estimated 33,000 urban foxes in the UK. Since then, in some areas it is believed that they may have increased, while in others mange epidemics have decreased numbers.

Some people are not keen on foxes, but many enjoy seeing, and perhaps feeding, them in their gardens. A magazine survey found foxes are the second most popular animal in Britain. But, some people worry about their presence or find them a nuisance. As a consequence, a number of questions are asked about encouraging foxes, the risks foxes pose or how they can be deterred from gardens.

Your questions answered ....

How can I help foxes in the area?

If you regularly see foxes in your garden, they have probably already found a good food supply in the area. But sometimes food may be scarce, when cubs are being reared or during the winter, so providing small amounts could help and even give you a chance to watch them. If you want to provide some food, put out cheese, boiled potatoes, raw chicken pieces, bread and table scraps at dusk. Don't put out too much as foxes may not move far if all the food they need is available in one garden – they may bury some, defecate or cause other problems in neighbouring gardens leading to ill-feeling against the foxes.

How can I block a fox earth I have found in my garden?

If you find a fox earth in the garden, don't block it unless you are sure it is empty. To check, lightly block the entrances with loose soil or sticks, through which a fox can easily break out. If after a few days the holes are still blocked, pack them more thoroughly with soil. Take great care in the spring to avoid blocking cubs into an earth – instead block earths between late summer and late winter.

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How can I stop foxes howling at night?

Foxes call throughout the year, but normally only howl or scream during the mating season, which peaks in January. During the mating season, it may be worth considering the use of ear plugs if the howling disturbs you.

How can I deter foxes from using my garden?

Foxes are opportunists, searching for and defending areas with suitable food and shelter. The most humane and long-term solution to discourage foxes from your garden is to remove or prevent access to what attracts them to the area.

Remove access to any potential food supplies

- Only provide food for wild birds on fox-proof (roofed) bird tables or in feeders.
- Protect fruit and vegetable crops – use fencing or a frame of netting; using at least 4cm mesh to reduce the risk of other wildlife getting tangled in the netting.
- Clear away windfall fruit.
- Use securely sealed dustbins and composters.
- Keep pet rabbits etc in secure enclosures, and put a roof on any pet or chicken-run. Enclosures should also have a weld-mesh front secured with a good lock that cannot be worked loose. Also clear up any spilt pet food on the ground.

Remove places of shelter

- Cut or clear any areas of long grass or dense vegetation – dense cover can provide a safe, sheltered location for a fox to lie up undisturbed during the day.
- Keep garage, greenhouse and shed doors closed.
- Prevent access to areas under sheds – these can provide ideal shelter or a location for digging an earth to raise cubs.

Deter foxes from the garden

- Put up fencing or plant prickly plants around the garden.
- Use a proprietary animal repellent approved for use with foxes.

Repellent products are widely available from garden centres or hardware stores. Take care to read the label and closely follow the instructions, as each product is prepared and approved for use against certain animals in the specified way. It is illegal to use any substance to deter foxes that has not been approved for such use.

What is the risk to children?

Foxes are wary of people and would normally run away to avoid adults and children. They will learn to trust people who are not causing them harm and may appear quite bold – but this is unlikely to be a sign of aggression.

It is possible to get mange from foxes and dogs, but the risk from foxes is very low, as direct contact is the most likely source of infection. Another disease risk is from the roundworm (*Toxocara canis*) found in dog, cat and fox droppings, which can cause toxocariasis in children. Remove any faeces and use a repellent to reduce the risk of these animals fouling in your garden – but the risk of children picking up this parasite from fox droppings appears to be extremely low. If you have any concern about these and any other potential health risks from animals, contact your doctor.

What is the risk to cats?

Both cats and foxes are abundant in towns and active at night, so the low number of incidents of foxes attacking cats clearly shows that most are at little or no risk from foxes. Foxes and cats have also been watched through night vision binoculars. The animals usually either ignored each other, or the foxes were chased away or were nervous of the cats. Research that looked at 1,939 fox droppings collected in Oxford over a seven-year period, found only eight contained traces of cat fur. But even the presence of cat fur does not mean foxes kill cats. Foxes are scavengers and may eat from the carcass of a cat killed by road traffic.

To report an injured or sick fox to the RSPCA please ring the 24-hour cruelty and advice line on 0300 1234 999