

Problems with Foxes?

The red fox is a native relative of the dog common throughout Britain. Extremely adaptable, it is an established resident of our urban environment.

Habitat

There has been a rapid spread of foxes into urban areas during the 20th century, particularly in the south of England. This has mirrored the growth in urban sprawl. Like people, foxes prefer suburban housing with large gardens where they can find shelter under shrubbery, sheds, and in secluded corners.

Foxes shelter in burrows known as earths or dens. An active den can easily be identified as it is likely to be surrounded by an untidy array of food remnants, faeces and miscellaneous items. Well worn paths to the entrance, which is about 25 cm wide, and a decidedly unpleasant musty smell, will betray the recent presence of foxes.

Breeding

Foxes breed once a year. The mating season begins 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 remain exclusively in the den until about May.

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, although in urban areas many remain in or around their original home territory.

Some people believe the fox population is increasing but this is not the case. Fox populations are relatively stable and self regulating according to the availability of habitat and food.

Diet

The fox is an omnivore, eating birds, rabbits, small mammals, insects, worms, fruit, grass and a wide variety of scavenged food. In urban areas, scavenged food can constitute up to 50% of their diet as foxes eat what we discard.

So what's the problem?

Many people derive great pleasure from urban wildlife and actively encourage them. Studies by the RSPCA have found that most people either like or are indifferent to the fox, and that regardless of attitude, few people suffer actual problems from foxes, and many of the problems are minor and easily rectified.

However, for those who have concerns or are having problems with foxes, the following information may be of assistance.

Is the fox a health risk?

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. Always treat wild animals with respect.

Foxes also pose no real danger to cats. Although foxes will scavenge the remains of dead cats, the actual evidence of them killing cats is extremely rare. Cats greatly outnumber foxes and coexist without serious conflict. In most cat/fox encounters, it is the fox who comes off worse, and many fox cubs are killed each year by pet cats and dogs.

However, pets like rabbits and guinea pigs are a natural part of the fox diet so need to be securely housed to ensure the fox does not get the opportunity of an easy meal. A chicken wire enclosure is not strong enough to deter a determined fox. Foxes also eat rats and other rodents and can thus help to keep pest populations in check.

The most common disease of the fox is canine mange. It is caused by a mite and leads to intense irritation, fur loss, and skin infection. Left untreated it can lead to death in a few months. However, it cannot easily transfer to humans or cats, and it is unlikely to transfer to pet dogs unless they come into close contact. It is easily cured, and any fox with mange should be treated to avoid suffering.

The moult, or shedding of the winter coat, can be mistaken for mange. It can make foxes look diseased, starved or mangy, but it is natural and harmless.

Problems with foxes

Most of the problems people report involve damage to gardens, raiding of rubbish and the unpleasant smell and fouling associated with foxes. These can be a significant irritant to many people.

The area around dens is likely to be untidy and smelly and damage to gardens is almost inevitable, either from digging to construct the den or for food, or from incidental damage when cubs are playing. Foxes scent mark their territories and deposit their faeces in prominent locations. While this form of communication is important for foxes, it is also unpleasant.

Foxes are often blamed for scavenging and scattering rubbish, although this is also true of other urban animals including our pets. This problem is easily avoided by proper storage and disposal of waste. Rubbish, particularly food waste, should be securely stored, preferably in a bin with a lid, and placed out not earlier than the night before collection.

Some people are also disturbed by the loud cries of foxes, heard mainly during winter nights or in late summer. These are either mating calls, territorial disputes or cubs battling to establish top dog status. There is little that can be done, and the nocturnal disturbances don't last long.

Fox “Control”

Some people believe lethal control of foxes is necessary. In fact, apart from being costly and controversial, it is ineffective. Killing some simply results in less competition and increased breeding success for the remainder.

In the late 1940s, MAFF began a programme of killing foxes in the London area. Despite this, foxes continued to thrive, and the practice was abandoned in the 1970s. Cars are responsible for about half of all fox deaths.

While the maximum life expectancy for a fox is about 14 years, in urban areas it is about two years. Urban areas provide a good life, but not a long one.

Some people think foxes should be relocated to the country “where they belong”. However, the countryside is not just a wilderness where wild animals can be dumped. Urban foxes do not belong in the country, and are unlikely to survive there. Relocation is impractical, and potentially cruel and illegal.

Some pest control companies will kill foxes at considerable cost. However, another fox family may simply move into the vacated territory, and there are usually better ways of dealing with fox problems.

How do I deal with my fox problem?

Some problems such as noise, are temporary and resolve themselves. Others like scavenging and killing captive pets, can be avoided with a few simple precautions.

However, if you don't wish to have foxes in your garden, you need to make the environment unattractive to foxes so they don't choose to stay.

Make sure there is little to attract them in the first place. Clear overgrown gardens which could provide resting areas, and make sure there is no food available in rubbish, on compost heaps, or left on the ground for animals. Don't use fertilisers like blood, fish and bone meal as they attract foxes.

If foxes frequent your garden, they can usually be deterred through the determined use of smell repellents. The most widely recommended include Scoot, Stay Off, Get Off My Garden, Wash Off and Get Off. The use of rags soaked in substances like creosote or petrol, must not be employed as it is illegal, poses a fire hazard and is potentially harmful to animals, including pets.

The successful use of repellents requires **persistence**. Foxes will not vacate an attractive territory easily and problems with scent marking may get worse before they get better. Foxes may initially increase their scent marking as they battle with you over territory. To be successful, you may have to continually reapply the repellent for some considerable time, before the foxes admit defeat and depart.

If a den is the problem, it needs to be blocked securely to prevent access but only when all foxes are out of the den. Initially only loose soil should be used to block the entrances so any foxes trapped inside, or a mother trying to rescue her cubs, will be able to dig themselves out. *You must never trap a fox in its den.* It is cruel and illegal.

During the breeding season, daily checks must be made for up to two weeks, as a fox may stay underground for days while feeding cubs. Only once you are certain a den is vacant, can it be blocked with something like rubble or cement that will prevent the fox digging it out again.

Removing anything that will attract a fox, making the environment unattractive by the use of repellents, and using barriers to block their access, should rid most people of unwanted foxes. An understanding of fox habits coupled with persistence, is the key to stopping foxes living in your garden.

Council Policy

In common with many other authorities, Richmond does not support or practise lethal control. It supports coexistence and humane deterrence. Foxes are not vermin, they are part of our urban wildlife. Residents are given advice and encouraged to adopt humane solutions to their fox problems.

Other Sources of Help

The Fox Project is the UK's foremost information centre for practical advice on fox deterrence.

They publish an excellent booklet, *Unearthing the Urban Fox* (£5.50) which has invaluable information on foxes and how to deter them. They also offer an on-site consultancy service for a fee.

The Fox Project can be contacted on 01892-826-222, or on the internet at www.foxproject.org.uk.

The National Fox Welfare Society, can provide information on deterrence and assistance on homeopathic mange treatment. They can be contacted on 01933-411-996 or via internet at www.nfws.org.uk.

If you have any comments regarding this leaflet, or if you require more information, please contact the residential team at: residentialeh@richmond.gov.uk or on 020 8487 5123.

If you require a copy of this leaflet in Braille, large print, on audio tape, or in a community language, please contact the Communication Unit on 020-8891-7162.