

The red fox

Information and control advice

The red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), commonly referred to as the urban fox, is one of the most adaptable mammals on earth and inhabits a wide range of environments from the Arctic Tundra to the deserts of North America. It is therefore no surprise that they are now a resident in many cities throughout the UK. Although classed as predators, foxes are lazy and prefer to scavenge for food, and towns provide the ideal environment for them to thrive. Although foxes are now more numerous than they were ten years ago, current research suggests that London's fox population has reached its maximum limit and that the rise in complaints and number of sightings is due to a change in the foxes behaviour and this may be due to people feeding them. Fox populations are self limiting and are influenced by the availability of food and territory, in fact the average age for a London fox is 2 years, with road traffic accidents being responsible for 60% of all fox deaths.

Can the council remove foxes?

Foxes have not been classified as vermin by DEFRA and therefore the council does not have a responsibility to remove them. Controlling urban foxes is a contentious issue and as of yet there is no solution to the problem as any attempts to remove them have shown that it is only temporary and numbers soon return to their previous level. It is for this reason that we do not recommend that people contact private pest control companies for fox removal. The fox is usually killed and whilst the homeowners may remain fox free for a few months, sooner or

later they start to experience problems again. However Lewisham council does realise that foxes cause a problem for many residents and this leaflet is designed to provide people with information on how to live with foxes and how to deter them.

Do foxes attack people?

Generally foxes are scared of humans and given the opportunity will run away. However a fox may bite to defend itself if cornered. If a fox wanders into your home it is going to be confused and scared, leave all of the doors open and it will probably flee as quickly as possible. Occasionally foxes approach houses and cat flaps as they have gotten used to approaching people for food, they are unlikely to be aggressive and are usually just being inquisitive.

Do foxes attack and kill cats?

Both foxes and cats are nocturnal so it is not unusual for them to meet and even occupy the same territory. Attacks on cats by foxes appear to be rare and a survey carried out in Oxford looked at 1,939 fox faeces over a seven years period and found that only 8 contained traces of cat fur, it does not say how the fur came to be in the faeces, foxes are scavengers and may eat a cat that has been killed on the road. Other studies carried out have shown that generally cats and foxes ignore each other when they meet and on occasions where there is confrontation it is the fox that comes off worse.

Feeding foxes

It is not illegal to feed foxes, but there are issues that must be considered in feeding them. Feeding foxes can reduce their territory to 10% of its former range, and this can lead to other householders experiencing problems which may endanger the fox. There is also a risk that feeding foxes may attract other animals such as mice, rats and pigeons which can pose a threat to human health. Therefore we do not advise that our residents feed them.

If however you still wish to feed foxes we urge you to be responsible in your approach. Foxes are omnivorous and eat a wide diversity of prey including small mammals, insects and windfall fruit. Cheese, boiled potatoes, chicken carcasses, bread and fat scraps can all be fed. Do not put out too much food and as if they are getting all the food they need from one garden they are unlikely to venture far from it. They may also cache the food in neighbours gardens, which can cause a problem for some people. Under no circumstances should you hand feed foxes. Problems can arise as a result of hand feeding, as foxes can become so tame that they may approach strangers expecting food. Many people are frightened of foxes and do not realise that they are being inquisitive not aggressive.

Do foxes pose a health risk?

Like all wild animals foxes do carry some diseases, but the risk to human health is actually very small. The most common disease is mange, this is caused by a small mite that burrows under the skin causing intense irritation to the fox, it can be fatal to the animal if left untreated. Dogs are also susceptible to mange but the risk to humans is very small.

They can also carry roundworm (*Toxocara canis*) which is found in dog, cat and fox faeces, and which can cause toxocariasis in children. The risk of catching this is low but precautions should be taken to minimise the risk. When removing fox faeces always wear gloves and use tools that are only designated for that task. If you come into contact with faeces wash the

area immediately and if you have any concerns you should contact a doctor.

What to do if you find an injured fox

In Lewisham, during working hours, where possible an officer from Lewisham Animal Welfare will attend to deal with the injured animal. If an officer is unavailable or it is out of working hours you should call the RSPCA or one of the fox organisations on the back of this booklet. It should be borne in mind that foxes frequently receive minor but visible injuries, so although you may see one with a limp, it is still able to function perfectly well, and the best course of action may be to let it heal naturally. Catching a fox, confining it and trying to treat it can cause the fox a great deal more stress, and cause it to injure itself further, particularly if it is trying to escape capture.

What to do if you find an orphaned fox cub

It is not uncommon for foxes to leave their older cubs unattended, sometimes for quite lengthy periods and only return briefly to feed them, so do not immediately assume that the cubs are orphaned or abandoned. If the cubs are lying quietly they are probably being cared for; when they are hungry they will start making plaintive barking noises. If you think they are deserted, **DO NOT TOUCH THEM**. If the cubs are all together and hungry then the mother may have been killed, but if it is a single cub it is much more likely that it has strayed and cannot find its way home. The plaintive barking is a contact call, so just keep an eye on it to ensure that it isn't attacked by a cat or dog and soon the vixen should recover it. If you are absolutely convinced that there is no mother then contact one of the organisations on the back page of this booklet.

Deterring foxes from gardens

There are several steps that people can take to make their gardens unsuitable for foxes. It is important to remember that when deterring foxes from your garden you must be consistent and persistent in your approach. It may take a while, but eventually the fox will get the message that they are not welcome and move

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on. It is also important that you continue to use your garden. Many people do not like foxes and stop using their gardens once the foxes move in, this just makes the fox feel more safe and secure as there is very little disturbance. If you continue to use your garden regularly you are less likely to have foxes nesting in there.

Secure your garden

Ensuring that the fences that surround your garden are secure can greatly reduce the problems that you are experiencing. Foxes can get through very small gaps so ensure that all potential access points are blocked up. Remove all potential food sources

- Make sure that your rubbish is disposed of properly, preferably in a wheelie bin, if this is not possible use a bin with a secure lid.
- Clear away all windfall fruit
- If you are feeding birds only use bird tables that have a roof or feeders that can be hung up.

Keep your garden tidy

- Foxes are attracted to overgrown gardens as these provide a safe sheltered environment for them to rear their cubs. If you or your neighbour is elderly and having trouble with the upkeep of the garden Age UK may be able to help. They can provide volunteers to help with the garden providing the person that puts in the request has the appropriate tools. There may be a small charge for this service. They can be contacted on 020 7701 9700
- Tidy away all toys, tools, gloves and shoes, anything that smells different is interesting to a fox cub and they usually take them away and hide them.

Prevent access to sheds

Sheds, greenhouses and garages are ideal for foxes as they are quiet, warm and usually undisturbed. If you do not want foxes to utilise these areas it is important that you site them

correctly. Always build them on a concrete base as this will stop a fox from digging underneath it and keep all doors and access points closed when they are not in use.

House all pets safely and securely

Rabbits, guinea pigs, chickens and other small pets are seen as a potential prey to a fox. It is important that they are kept safely and securely at all times. The RSPCA recommend that enclosures should have a weld mesh front secured with a good lock that cannot be worked loose, a determined fox will chew through chicken mesh so this should not be used. As foxes are now frequently seen in the day time, it is important that precautions are taken in daylight as well. If you leave your pet out make sure that it is in secure run and that you can keep an eye on it and check it regularly. Do not leave your pet unattended in a run for long periods of time.

Commercial deterrents

In cases where foxes are causing a persistent problem commercial deterrents may help, it is important that you only use products that have been approved for use against certain animals as it is illegal to use ones that have not been. The most commonly available product is called Get Off My Garden, this should be used in accordance with the instructions on the packet.

Common problems and solutions

Noise: January – February is peak mating season for foxes and this tends to be when people get disturbed by their calling. Unfortunately mating season also coincides with the peak dispersal of cubs from the previous year. Although unpleasant, the noise is not a result of the foxes getting hurt. There is little that a household can do to prevent foxes calling at night, the RSPCA recommend investing in ear plugs. Fortunately the season does not last long and a normal nights sleep is usually restored after a few weeks.

Fouling: Foxes foul in gardens to scent mark their territory, the same way that dogs will scent mark particular areas on their walks. If they are

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fouling concrete areas, cleaning with bleach only temporarily masks the smell, so they are still likely to return to the same place. Use residue of the waste, such as biological washing powder mixed with hot water or an enzyme based product from the vet.

Digging: Digging is usually a problem in the summer months when the foxes, particularly cubs are looking for insect larvae. Commercial deterrents may help, and some allotment holders have reported that lightly crushed garlic cloves can be effective in deterring foxes from particular areas, and protect fruit and vegetable crops with fencing or from 4cm mesh.

Also avoid using fertilizers containing fish blood or bone meal, as these confuse the fox into thinking that there is food buried in the area.

The Fox Project
The Lodge
Kings Toll Road
Pembury
Kent
TN2 4BE
www.foxproject.org.uk

Head Office: 01892 824 111
Mobile Ambulance 9am-9pm daily: 01892 731 565
Deterrence line (pre-recorded): 01892 826 222

Humane Urban Wildlife Deterrence
Tel: 01732 357 355

Useful contacts

Lewisham Animal Welfare Service
[Report your concern about foxes](#)

Willow Wildlife Rescue 07956 472 284

The RSPCA
0300 1234 999
www.rspca.org.uk

National Fox Welfare Society
135 Higham Road
Rushden
Northants NN10 6DS
Tel: 01933 411996
www.nfws.org.uk

The Fox Project
The Southborough Centre
Draper Street
Southborough
Kent TN4 0PG
Head Office: 01892 545468
Mobile Ambulance: 07778909092
Deterrence line (pre recorded): 01892 514863