

GLASGOW CITY COUNCIL

Conservation Factsheet No 2: URBAN FOXES

Due to a high volumes of calls received about urban foxes the Council would like to stress the advice to members of the public to refrain from feeding foxes. It is very important that no attempt is made to try to tame foxes, to encourage them to feed from the hand or to encourage them close or into houses using food. This is not fair on the foxes and is only likely to cause problems later for people and the foxes themselves. Urban foxes are wild animals and should be treated as such.

Foxes are native to the UK and many people enjoy seeing them.

Foxes are not considered a significant threat to public health and it is not Council policy to control them in any way.

Foxes are territorial so any control is not recommended. If any foxes are relocated or killed another family of foxes will soon move in to occupy the vacant territory.

It is the responsibility of the owner/occupier of the property to deal with any issues.

Introduction

Foxes have inhabited the City of Glasgow for at least sixty years, although there have been anecdotal suggestions that they became more common and spread into the city centre during the 1960s and 1970s. They are now seen frequently in suburban gardens, parks, cemeteries and other open spaces throughout the city.

Many people are delighted to see a fox, but some regard them as a nuisance, especially if they occupy a den under a building or undertake certain activities too close for comfort. Complaints include fouling, digging up of lawns or flower beds, and causing a disturbance by barking ('shrieking' might be a more appropriate term) at night.

Foxes eat a wide range of foodstuffs. Their diet includes small mammals, birds (including eggs), reptiles, insects, earthworms, fruit, vegetable and carrion. In urban areas, about a third of their diet is scavenged waste or food deliberately provided by householders.

Foxes live in small family groups that occupy a territory. The den is located within the territory and the group defends this territory from other foxes. Territories in urban areas are typically much smaller than in the surrounding countryside.

Although a few foxes can become relatively quite tame, the average fox is very timid and will flee from any person who approaches it. **It is important that no attempt is made to encourage foxes to become tame, which could lead to problems for foxes and people alike.**

It is also important to remember that the Red Fox, to give it its proper name, is a natural member of our wildlife community, and should be appreciated as the only surviving species of wild dog in the United Kingdom. In fact the Red Fox, scientific name *Vulpes vulpes*, is not a true dog but does belong to the same family – ‘Canidae’ (dogs and foxes).

Frequently Asked Questions

Why have foxes become so common in towns? Foxes are highly adaptable animals and are found in a wide range of habitats, from seashore to mountain top. The fox is primarily a carnivore, but also eats a variety of invertebrates and fruits. They can find plenty of food in towns where there are small mammals, including rats, for them to prey upon. They are also highly effective scavengers, and in town waste food can be plentiful. Late at night, the occasional fox can be seen scouring the city centre for discarded fish suppers and other fast foods! Increasingly, some people are deliberately putting out food to attract foxes into their gardens. The easy availability of food is one of the reasons that urban foxes are abundant.

Are foxes protected by law? Foxes are not afforded protection from humane control measures. However the law does prevent the use of poisons or illegal traps or snares to control foxes, and it is illegal to shoot them in public urban areas such as parks.

Aren't foxes 'vermin'? This is a very subjective term. Scientific research has shown the fox's reputation as an agricultural pest to be undeserved; they very rarely kill lambs, despite many an anecdote to the contrary. They will occasionally take hens or domestic ducks from a farmyard, but such losses can be largely avoided by securing the birds safely at night. In urban areas foxes pose few problems other than being an occasional nuisance; in fact it could be argued that they perform a useful scavenging role by clearing up discarded take-aways at night, as well as keeping rodent numbers under control.

Do foxes carry diseases? As with pet dogs, foxes can carry *Toxocara canis*, a parasitic roundworm which can be passed to humans. However infection is extremely rare and only affects around two people per million in the UK each year. All known infections have been transmitted from dogs, and in fact there is no recorded instance of foxes spreading any disease to humans. Fox faeces and urine may contain bacteria which could cause sickness in humans, so basic hygiene precautions should be followed.

Rabies is currently unknown in British foxes.

Will they attack my pets? The fox is no match for most domestic cats and dogs, and it is very rare for a fox to harm them. Young kittens and puppies are more vulnerable so should not be left outside unattended. Foxes will kill smaller animals for food such as rabbits, and steps should be taken to ensure the security of hutches or cages. On the plus side, foxes do control mice and rats which are not desirable in or around domestic situations.

Why do they dig in my garden? Foxes naturally eat invertebrates such as worms and insect larvae, which they dig out of the soil. They also dig holes in which to hide larger food items such as small mammals or birds, returning to retrieve them later. In larger gardens foxes may excavate dens, or *earths*, in which the vixen raises her family. These typically have one entrance hole up to 30cm in diameter, and active occupation is indicated by a strong musky odour.

Can fox numbers be controlled? The control of foxes by killing or relocating is not recommended in urban areas for a number of reasons. Primarily, fox control is not advisable because it does not reduce the fox population over a prolonged period of time. The empty territory created would soon be occupied by another family of foxes.

If foxes are causing a nuisance then the best recommendation is to exclude them from the vicinity where the damage occurs eg your garden.

How can I get rid of foxes? First of all, consider whether they are genuinely causing a nuisance. If they are, there are a number of measures which can be taken to deter foxes from your garden without harming them. These include:

- The use of chemical repellents to deter mammals. These can usually be obtained at garden centres, DIY stores and ironmongers. A wider range of repellents is available online and includes products specifically aimed at deterring foxes. Only use approved products and always follow the label instructions. Target areas around your boundary or at places where you know the fox is gaining entry, or at spots of known activity such as digging or resting. It is often recommended that spraying in dry weather is preferable because the repellent is not washed away.
- Recent reports suggest that **motion-activated sprinklers** that repel foxes with a short but startling burst of water can be very successful as a deterrent.
- Do not put out food for them and make sure household waste is disposed of in a secured bin. If you feed the birds in your garden, use feeders and bird tables, and if you do put food out on the ground, do so in the morning, never in the evening.
- Enjoy your garden! Human activity is the best deterrent.
- Fencing, which requires being a strong weld-mesh wire dug in to at least 60cm and to a height of at least 2 metres.

If you discover an active fox den in your garden, it would be cruel and illegal to block up the entrance or take measures to evict the cubs. Cubs are born in March and abandon the den completely by August or September, so it is best to wait until September and then fill the entrance lightly with sand, if necessary repeating this daily until any remaining animals are persuaded to abandon the den. This procedure can be applied any time between September and February.

The Fox's Year

January	The mating season, when territories are well established and vocal activity at night starts to decline.
February	The vixen seeks out a den (or earth), which she may be actively excavating.
March	The cubs are born, and the vixen stays underground while her mate hunts and brings in food.
April	The cubs start to appear outside the den.
May	The cubs are now eating some solid food brought in by both parents.
June	The cubs are weaned from their mother's milk and stay above ground most of the time.
July	The parents begin to provide less food to encourage the cubs to start fending for themselves.
August	The cubs begin to forage and become less dependent on their parents.
September	Cubs are now fully grown. Natural food is plentiful and they start to forage on their own.
October	Families begin to break up and young animals start to disperse.
November	Adults fight with young animals, causing further dispersion.
December	Foxes are highly territorial and nocturnal vocalisation reaches its peak.

Further Help and Advice

As foxes are not known to pose any significant threat to public health, it is not Council policy to control them in any way, so please do not contact the Council's Pest Control Officers. It is the responsibility of the owner or occupier of the property to deal with any issues.

Organisations offer a service, including non-lethal and humane methods of control and these can be found on the internet.

Further reading and useful websites:

Harris and Baker (2001). *Urban Foxes* Whittet Books ISBN 1 873580 517

www.thefoxwebsite.net

<http://foxproject.org.uk/deterrence/>

Practical assistance in rescuing foxes from buildings or other enclosed situations can be obtained free from the Hesselhead Wildlife Rescue Trust (tel. 01505 502415), but please bear in mind that they are a charity and rely upon public donations.

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