



LIVING WITH... FOXES

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 specialised food requirements, so it is not surprising that they live in many of our towns and cities. 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. Overgrown areas and spaces under garden sheds provide shelter and food is abundant. Older housing in industrial towns and many modern developments have little open space or small gardens but will still support populations of urban foxes.

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. They eat large beetles, craneflies ('daddy-long-legs'), earthworms, field voles, small birds, blackberries, windfall apples and pears. A warm, wet night can provide hundreds of worms that are easily picked off lawns for a substantial meal. They may also scavenge from bird tables or compost heaps.

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. Recent data however, indicates that the national urban population of foxes has remained about the same.

Many people enjoy seeing foxes in their gardens. A magazine survey found foxes are the second most popular animal in Britain. However, some people are not keen on foxes and 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.

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 and foxes are excellent scavengers. If you decide to provide food for foxes it's important to bear in mind that whilst you like to see foxes your neighbours may not share the same view and may see foxes as a problem, which could result in action taken against the animals. As a result we would always recommend caution when feeding foxes. **Don't try to make them tame,** never hand-feed them or put out too much food 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.

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How can I deter foxes from using my garden?

REMOVE ACCESS TO ANY POTENTIAL FOOD SUPPLIES

- Provide food for wild birds in feeders that are less likely to spill, preventing foxes from scavenging.
- Protect fruit and vegetable crops – use fencing or solid weld-mesh; **avoid using netting and use at least a 4cm mesh** to reduce the risk of wildlife getting tangled or caught in it.
- Clear away any windfall fruit.
- Use securely sealed dustbins and composters.
- Keep pets such as rabbits indoors overnight, or in secure enclosures. These enclosures should have a roof and use weld-mesh instead of chicken wire for fencing. The door should be secured with a good lock that cannot be worked loose. 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, as these provide an ideal location for digging an earth to raise cubs.

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 dig 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 during autumn and winter.

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.

DETER FOXES FROM THE GARDEN

- Put up fencing or plant prickly plants around the garden.
- Use an 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 carefully 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.**



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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's important that people do not try to hand-feed foxes or make them tame**, as this may encourage foxes to approach people who may not like them and take action against them.

It is possible for people and pets 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.**

I think a fox cub has been orphaned, what should I do?

If you find a fox cub on its own with its eyes open, it's probably fine. Parents stay nearby so the cubs can develop their hunting and survival skills.

Leave a supply of dog food and water nearby and check back in 24 hours.

If the cub is in immediate danger (on a road or somewhere exposed) move it to a safe, sheltered spot nearby, handling as little as possible.

If you have found a fox cub with its eyes still closed, or you know for a fact the cub is an orphan, please call the number below.

What is the risk to cats and dogs?

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.

Scent is an important element of communication in foxes and sometimes a dog fox will follow a female dog in heat but it is not common for this to happen. Because dogs may pose a real threat to foxes, **a fox will normally seek to avoid dogs.**



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