

Policy statement

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FOXES IN LONDON

The red fox is the most widespread and abundant wild carnivore in the world. Found throughout UK, it is very common in London, and in some Boroughs even more so than in the surrounding countryside. This is not surprising considering how adaptable red foxes are when faced with a changing environment. Most of the year they are hardly noticed and many people living in London take great pleasure in seeing a truly wild animal in their neighbourhood. However, sometimes foxes can become a nuisance, and inevitably there are calls to remove or cull them.

I. Policy

- The red fox is an attractive and valuable addition to London's ecosystems. It is not a species of conservation concern, and not a threat to any wild species within London.
- Through our land-holdings London Wildlife Trust will provide havens where foxes can forage and breed, and we will not undertake any deterrence actions unless they can be proven to have a significant adverse impact on the nature conservation interests of a particular site.
- London Wildlife Trust sees no justification for the culling, hunting, poisoning or removal of red fox for only 'nuisance' reasons. We will, within the resources available, oppose measures to hunt, eradicate, or cull fox within London.
- London Wildlife Trust advocates pragmatic and humane methods in the necessary controlling or deterring of foxes. We recognise that removal and/or killing maybe necessary where this serves over-riding public health concerns, or the best welfare interests of the animal (e.g. injury or untreatable disease).
- We do not operate a fox rescue service, but will direct such requests to relevant wildlife rescue services.
- We will provide advice on foxes, including means of deterrence and humane control, and gather expertise on these issues.
- We will seek to encourage the gathering of information on red fox behaviour in and around London, and where possible monitor and review the current information on red fox population numbers in London to inform future actions.
- We will endeavour to gather information on the attitudes and values people in London place on the red fox, in order to inform any future policy or actions.

2. Habitat and habits

From country to town

The red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) started appearing in towns and cities following World War I due to a change in people's lifestyles. New transport systems allowed people to work in one place and to live in another, and suburban housing was built in once rural areas. Foxes quickly adapted, taking advantage of the food and shelter provided in these new relatively large gardens. Now accustomed to living in close range of people, successive generations have spread inwards towards the city centre. Today there can be more opportunities of food and shelter in towns and cities than in the surrounding countryside, with the destruction of hedgerows, woods and wild field margins.

The number of foxes being drawn to urban living is thought to have increased significantly in the last two decades, and there are now few areas of London in which they are not present. There are thought to be 10,000 foxes in London and the animals have been spotted in the choir stalls at St Paul's Cathedral and outside 10 Downing Street. Over 60% of the fox population are killed due to traffic accidents every year; however the number of foxes in London remains constant.

Diet, behaviour and habitat

The red fox is omnivorous, with a varied diet ranging from worms, fruit, small mammals and birds. Discarded food forms only a third of their diet and whilst they will open plastic bin liners and overturn dustbins, these form a minor part of their behaviour. Domestic cats and rats have similar feeding habits and may be responsible for causing a mess. Foxes foraging for worms and other invertebrates will dig up gardens and there are a wide range of products for deterring this behaviour. The principal prey in their diet is small to medium-sized mammals which can cause concern for pet owners.

Foxes live in family groups and will usually have a breeding earth and one or more smaller earths where they spend time outside of the breeding season within their territory. Territories in urban environments are around ½ km² and they will use urine and faeces to mark them. January and December are the months when foxes start to look for mates and this becomes apparent by the piercing vixen's scream. This is part of the social life of foxes and their communication and it does not last for long.

3. Mange and other diseases

Many people are concerned that foxes may spread disease. Foxes' diseases include the sarcoptic mange, flystrike, canine distemper, rabies, and fox tapeworm.

Sarcoptic mange, a highly contagious skin condition caused by the mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*, and the most common infection in British foxes. The infection is very painful for the animal resulting in irritation and extensive loss of hair, it can be fatal if left untreated. Many urban foxes suffer from mange, and it is one of the commonest reasons people call wildlife rescue centres to help foxes.

Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) is a paramyxovirus belonging to the same group of viruses as measles. Although dogs are the most commonly affected species, CDV is also found in foxes. *Toxocariasis* commonly affects all dogs (wild and domestic), and the most common disease which foxes are likely to transmit to people, although incidence is far less likely than from domestic dogs.

Rabies and the fox tapeworm are not found in Britain's foxes.

4. Protection and control

Fox numbers are largely controlled by available food (much of which Londoners provide directly and indirectly) and annual mortality through disease and/or traffic. Were London's fox population to increase considerably, this may impact on the populations of small mammals and birds on which they feed, although this is unlikely given the availability of food they can scavenge from streets and gardens. At present there are no reasons to control the fox population in London, although there may be local numbers which may appear to be high. These are generally temporary (e.g. after young animals are weaned), and will drop as animals move to fill vacant territories.

Foxes are part of the urban wildlife and are not classified as pest or vermin, therefore your local council is not obligated to take action. Since 2005, fox hunting is illegal in England and The Hunting Act 2004 prohibits the use of hounds to kill foxes or other wild animals (although there were no registered fox hunts active in London prior to this date). The Wild Mammal (Protection) Act 1996 protects most mammals from many cruel acts that cause unnecessary suffering. The Protection of Animals Act 1911 can also be used when a fox has been captured and badly treated.

It is, however, legal to kill a fox following the methods permitted by the law. Shooting foxes remains legal (and remains the most commonly practiced method of control in London). It is an offence, however, to use a firearm close to a highway or near inhabited properties. Professional marksmen can be engaged to remove foxes but London Wildlife Trust does not advocate such unnecessary action unless fox numbers were found to have a negative impact on local wildlife populations or they were causing an overriding public health risk. There is no poison and gas that can be legally used on foxes and spring traps with teeth have been illegal in this country since 1954. Snares may be legally used to catch foxes but is subject to many restrictions. In urban areas it is doubtful that these restrictions can be met. It is an offence to set snares for foxes in a situation where a dog, cat or protected animal may be killed or injured. If there is evidence that a UK wild animal was poisoned (which is illegal), the Pesticides Safety Directorate investigates the case.

5. Sightings

Sightings of foxes in London help us to map their distribution and inform future policy and practice. Register with GiGL: <http://www.gigl.org.uk>

6. Sources of help and links

The Fox Project: <http://www.foxproject.org.uk/>

Fox Deterrence Helpline: 01892 826222 (24 hours) (recorded advice)

Mobile ambulance: 07778 909092 (9am-pm daily)

Info about mange: 01892 824111 (11am-3.30pm weekdays)

National Fox Welfare Society: <http://www.nfws.org.uk/>

Inquiries and to receive free of charge treatment for foxes: 01933 411 996

RSPCA: <http://www.rspca.org.uk>

Cruelty and advice line (to report an injured or sick fox): 0300 1234 999

Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme (WIIS): wiiis@hse.gsi.gov.uk

For suspected poisoning of fox: 01904 455739

Humane Urban Wildlife Deterrence: www.jbryant.co.uk

01732 357355 / 07770 788566

The Fox Website <http://www.thefoxwebsite.org/index.html>

League against Cruel Sports: <http://www.workingforwildlife.org.uk/reserves/fox.htm>

The Mammal Society: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/mammal/>

Approved repellents:

<http://webcommunities.hse.gov.uk/inovem/inovem.ti/pesticides/view?objectId=2308>

7. FAQs

What are the best ways to deter foxes from a garden?

- Generally, remove anything that will attract a fox and make the environment undesirable by the use of repellents and using barriers to block their access into the garden.

- Remove access to any potential source of food either on the ground, in compost heaps or in rubbish bags and don't use fertilizers such as blood, fish or bone meal as this will definitely attract foxes.
- Only provide food for wild birds on roofed bird tables or in feeders.
- Use securely sealed dustbins and composters
- Fence off vegetable patches with netting and place chicken wire just under the soil to protect bulbs.
- If the garden is overgrown it can provide good nesting areas and it might be worth clearing out. Open up the garden in order that there is no-where to settle and areas are exposed and draughty.
- The best deterrence is smell repellents to encourage the parents to take their cubs elsewhere. The deterrents are man-made smells which can leave adult foxes unsure of their control of the area and nervous which encourages a female to move the cubs elsewhere.
- Only approved products can legally be used and they must be used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions.
- The most widely recommended repellents are Scoot (this is good for protecting lawns and plants), Get Off (lemon/ citrus granules that prevent digging of holes and dens establishing), Stay Off, Wash Off and Get off my Garden. These are found in garden centres and hardware stores. Garden twine, rags or wood can be soaked in repellent solutions and placed around the garden or in specific areas such as in holes. Regular application of the solution is required to make it effective.
- 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 as they initially increase their scent marking as they battle for territory.
- Scent neutralisers can discourage foxes from fouling specific areas. This product reduces and neutralises the scents left behind by the fox from its faeces or urine. Fox faeces will need to be removed and the scent neutraliser applied to the area. Like repellents, scent neutralisers must be renewed regularly to remain effective.
- Ensure fences do not have any gaps. Where foxes must be kept out of an area for various reasons, electric fences can be installed. This has been used widely in rural areas when involving enclosed livestock.

Can I feed foxes in my garden, and if so, what?

- Although there is usually plenty of food for foxes to catch or scavenge, many people enjoy feeding them. It is not illegal to feed foxes; however some boroughs recommend not to feed them. Feeding foxes may attract other animals such as rats or pigeons which can be vectors of disease. Tinned dog food is very nutritious but keep the feeding light i.e. occasional small amounts.
- London Wildlife Trust recommends that people should stop feeding foxes if they discover that a neighbour is finding them a nuisance.

Will foxes harm pets?

- Foxes are really quite small (the size of a large cat) and pose no threat to dogs. It is extremely rare for a fox to attack a cat; most of the time they simply ignore each other. However, if the cat is small, young/ old i.e. vulnerable, a fox may take a chance on it, depending on the fox itself.
- Rabbits, chickens and other small pets should be protected and securely enclosed as they are very similar to fox's natural prey. It is essential to prevent fox from digging its way under any enclosure's netting and advice on this should be sought from one of the specialist fox organisations.
- The risk of domestic dogs becoming infected with mange or other diseases from a fox is slight, and if so can usually be quickly treated..

What do I do if I encounter an injured fox or abandoned cub?

- If a fox looks very badly injured, contact the RSPCA or a local wildlife hospital. However, it should be noted that injured animals often survive on their own, lying under a garden shed until the bones start to knit together. Once the fox is able to feed again it will soon regain its lost weight. Generally it is best not to move an injured or sick animal, rather to put out food for it each night. A fox taken in for treatment has only a slim chance of survival.

- *For apparently abandoned fox cubs a "do not disturb" approach is similarly true. A vixen normally leaves her cubs for long periods of time, especially as they get older. The rearing of truly orphaned cubs may be taken over by other members of the fox family group.*