

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 Britain, 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. 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 since the mid-1990s there have been alleged attacks upon pets and babies. Inevitably there are regular calls to remove or cull them, which have grown louder in recent years.

I. Policy

- The red fox is part of London's ecosystems. It is not a species of conservation concern, and although it predated on a range of animals (and other food) it does not appear to be a threat to most wild species (see below) populations within London.
- London Wildlife Trust may provide habitats where foxes can forage and breed - but does not specifically seek to encourage foxes - on our nature reserves. We will not undertake any deterrence actions on foxes unless they can be proven to have a significant adverse impact on the nature conservation interests of a particular site.
- We will provide advice on foxes, including means of deterrence and humane control, and gather expertise on these issues.
- The Trust does not recommend feeding of foxes, as there is plenty of food for them in London.
- The 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 eradicate, or cull fox within London, and will seek to retain – and appropriate enforcement of - the Hunting Act 2004.
- The Trust advocates pragmatic and humane methods in the necessary deterring or controlling of foxes. We recognise that removal and/or other humane methods maybe necessary where this serves over-riding public health concerns, or the welfare interests of the animal (e.g. injury or untreatable disease).
- 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. There is some concern that London's fox population, sustained partly on non-natural prey, could be adversely impacting on hedgehog populations, which are now vulnerable throughout much of the capital, and thus this matter requires further research.
- 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.
- We do not operate a fox rescue service, but will direct such requests to relevant wildlife rescue services.

The Trust will review this policy and amend it following any changes to legislation, planning guidance or scientific evidence, as appropriate.

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 three decades, and there are now very few areas of London in which they are not present. There are estimated to be 10,000 foxes in London (although there have been no detailed surveys) and individuals have been spotted in the choir stalls at St Paul's Cathedral, Parliament Square and outside 10 Downing Street. Over 60% of the fox population are killed by traffic every year; however the number of foxes in London appears to remain constant.

Diet, behaviour and habitat

The red fox is omnivorous, with a varied diet ranging from worms, fruit, small mammals and birds. In urban areas discarded food can form a significant part 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 also 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, such as rabbit, mice and voles, which can cause concern for owners of small pets but can contribute to control of rodents.

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 0.5km² and they will use urine and faeces to mark them. December and January 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. Issues of concern

Nuisance

The most common complaints about foxes in London are that they cause a nocturnal nuisance by blood-curdling screaming (especially during winter), digging holes in lawns and flower beds, burrowing under fences and garden sheds, pulling apart rubbish bags onto pavements, fouling lawns and patios, and taking up residence under school classrooms and outhouses.

Mange and other diseases

Many people are concerned that foxes may spread disease, especially to dogs. Diseases carried by foxes in Europe include sarcoptic mange, flystrike, canine distemper, rabies, and fox tapeworm.

Sarcoptic mange, a highly contagious skin condition caused by the mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*, is the most common infection in British foxes. The infection is very painful for the animal resulting in irritation and extensive loss of hair, and 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 them.

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. *Toxocarasis* 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.

Attacks on pets and people

Foxes are effective predators, and whilst their diet is omnivorous they will take birds and mammals, such as rats and mice. This extends to domestic pets and livestock, including rabbits and chickens. Without secure enclosures such animals are vulnerable to predation by fox, and they will kill all prey within enclosures if they have the opportunity. With a rise in the keeping of domestic chickens in London, calls to cull foxes have risen. Whilst adult cats and dogs are usually able to defend themselves (and are rarely the focus of attention by a fox) young kittens and small dogs are vulnerable; reports of attacks have occurred in the last 5 years.

Of more concern are the reports of attacks on babies. The first, in Norbury in 1995, have become more regular in the past decade, with recent reports in Hackney (2010), Downham, New Addington and Lewisham (2012 and 2013). Not only attracting headline news, they have been picked up by politicians calling for culls (as the Mayor of London did in 2013). Whilst not all of these have proven to have been caused by foxes (that in 1995 was eventually shown to have been the family's cat), the growing media noise and language describing foxes as 'a menace' increasingly makes rational debates difficult on measures to control foxes. Attacks by domestic dogs in Britain vastly outnumber those of all wild animals (over 20 people, including 14 children, have died as a result of dog attacks since 2005, and over 7,300 attacks by dogs have been recorded on people in the 12 months to March 2016, up by over 75% over the previous decade¹). Feeding foxes, especially close to houses, is likely to lead to foxes associating people with food, potentially increasing the risk of behaviour that maybe - or perceived to be - aggressive towards babies.

Conservation impacts

Foxes in London are unlikely to be significant threats to most wildlife species, although they may have localised impacts (for example on ground-nesting birds, frogs or stag beetle adults emerging). However there has been growing concern that high numbers of foxes could be exerting adverse pressure on hedgehogs. Foxes will predate hedgehogs and whilst it has long been assumed that they prefer to avoid them due to the hedgehogs' defensive spines, there is some evidence indicating marked predation on hedgehogs in some areas, especially – but not solely – on the weaker young. Given that hedgehog populations in London are severely vulnerable through habitat loss, traffic and application of molluscicides, efforts to conserve the species will need to consider how to minimise the pressure from fox populations.

4. Legislation 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 maybe 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. Most fox problems are seasonal and are usually related to fox cubs or juvenile foxes. Fox cubs, will leave of their own accord usually in June to early July where they will start travelling further afield with the adult parents. Juvenile foxes will start to leave the area in search of a territory and mate of their own. Localised control of foxes would, therefore, need to be carried out indefinitely to have any impact, as foxes from elsewhere would quickly fill any vacant territories created by culling or removal.

Foxes are not classified as pest or vermin, therefore a local authority is not obligated to take action. Fox hunting is illegal in England; 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 for some decades prior to this date). The Wild Mammal (Protection) Act 1996 protects most mammals from many cruel acts that

¹ Hospital Episode Statistics, NHS, 2016

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 is 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 the 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.

Poisons and gas cannot be legally used on foxes, and spring traps with teeth have been illegal in Britain since 1954. Snares may be legally used to catch foxes but are 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 native wild animal is poisoned (which is illegal), the Chemicals Regulation Directorate (at the HSE) 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: www.foxproject.org.uk/
Fox Deterrence Helpline: 01892 826222 (24 hours) (recorded advice)
Mobile ambulance: 01892 731565 (09.00-21.00 daily)

The Mammal Society: www.mammal.org.uk/

National Fox Welfare Society: www.nfws.org.uk/
Inquiries and to receive free of charge treatment for foxes: 01933 411 996

RSPCA: www.rspca.org.uk
Cruelty and advice line (to report an injured or sick fox): 0300 1234 999

Wildlife Incident Investigation Scheme (WIIS):
www.hse.gov.uk/pesticides/topics/reducing-environmental-impact/wildlife.htm
Report suspected incidents to 0800 321600 (calls are free)

League against Cruel Sports: www.league.org.uk/foxes

Humane Urban Wildlife Deterrence: www.jbryant.co.uk
01732 357355 / 07770 788566

Fox repellents: <https://foxrepellentexpert.com/>

7. FAQs

Can I feed foxes in my garden?

- *Although many people enjoy feeding them there is usually plenty of food in London for foxes to catch or forage for; we recommend that you do not feed them.*
- *It is not illegal to feed foxes; but some borough councils also recommend not to feed them. Feeding foxes increases their association of people's homes with food, and increased familiarity with people reduces their natural fear of people. Feeding foxes may attract other animals such as rats or pigeons which can be vectors of disease.*
- *We recommend that people should stop feeding foxes if they discover that a neighbour is finding them a nuisance.*

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 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 fox 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 to use smell repellents to encourage the fox 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. Do ensure the holes are not used by badgers to ensure you don't contravene the Badger Act. 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 in rural areas when to protect livestock and game.

Will foxes harm my pets?

- Adult foxes are the size of a large cat and pose no threat to most 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, infirm or otherwise 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?

- Injured animals often survive on their own. Once the fox is able to feed again it will soon regain its lost weight and some people may put food out for it every night to aid recovery. Generally it is best not to move an injured or sick animal. If a fox looks very badly injured, contact the RSPCA or a local wildlife hospital.
- 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.