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How the country fox learnt to love city living



Foxes have become common in urban gardens and parks

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Foxes colonised cities and towns about 80 years ago mainly because new housing developments encroached on their natural territory.

Since then there have been varying claims about the explosion of fox numbers in urban areas. Wildlife experts, including the RSPCA, however dispute this and believe there is a perceived increase because they are spotted more often in domestic gardens.

In the open country foxes can live in relative obscurity in hills, woodland and farmland, occasionally straying into a domestic garden. If farmers have a problem with a fox taking livestock or chickens they will attempt to trap or shoot the culprit.

In towns, however, foxes desperately need to find sheltered glades where they can live and rear their young. This may be a civic park or urban green space such as Hampstead Heath, North London, or Victoria Park in Hackney, near the home of the alleged fox attack on baby twins.

But private gardens are also on a town fox's radar and in particular they are attracted to overgrown trees and shrubs where they can protect their young. Occasionally they will settle underneath openings in garden sheds or other buildings.

According to the RSPB's spring garden watch survey last year, which had responses from 62,000 people, about 40 per cent in urban areas reported seeing a fox in their garden compared to 23 per cent with a garden in the countryside.

Despite their abundance fox attacks on humans are extremely rare and even when reports have made the headlines some have been disproved.

There is no uncertainty, however, that at this time of the year fox numbers in Britain are at a peak. There is no official head count but wildlife experts suggest there is a national population of about 200,000 to 250,000 at the start of the year, of which about 15 per cent are in urban areas. Some estimate that there are 30,000 foxes in London but there is no official record.

In March each year some vixens will give birth and the average litter is five cubs, though some will be stillborn or survive for just a few days.

It is estimated that the spring fox population rises to 400,000 to 450,000 foxes. The mother will wean her young for five or six weeks and about now they will begin to explore their territory. Female cubs will stay close to the vixen and dog fox but by the summer a male cub is let loose to find his own mate and colonise his own territory.

By the end of the year numbers will reduce and the breeding population will revert to 200,000 to 250,000. Local authorities do not cull foxes routinely, though anyone with a particular problem will be encouraged by the council to contact a pest control firm or a wildlife organisation and a fox can be trapped and shot. Foxes are also prone to a disease known as sarcoptic mange which will eventually destroy them, they may be killed by pet dogs or are victims of road traffic accidents. But at this time of the year a fox mother tending her young cubs is a charming sight in many town gardens and so too is the vision of a sleepy fox sheltering from the sun in the shadow of leafy branches. Many householders also encourage the animals by leaving out food, and some will attempt to tame them and offer titbits from their hand. For many urban dwellers the sight of a fox or a grey squirrel is the closest they ever get to nature.

Jim Barrington, an animal welfare consultant, said: "Foxes are very welcome in gardens. They are delightful animals and do not generally cause the damage they are blamed for. Digging up lawns is a common one. But foxes are wild predators and they will go after anything to eat, though generally they keep away from humans. Problems seem to arise when fox and man gets a bit close and the lines are blurred between fox as a tame rather than wild animal. People must remember they are not cuddly pets but also that foxes are curious animals and the new cubs will be exploring their territory."

He warned that chickens and pet rabbits were favourite prey of foxes in towns and that their pens should be protected with strong secured wire that can keep foxes out.

He also suggested that anyone wishing to discourage foxes from their garden should cut back trees and shrubs, to remove shady corners, to close up gaps under sheds or under buildings.

"Mr Barrington said: "The thing to do is to make life uncomfortable for them. A common trick is to put a dog blanket down or some dog urine. Foxes will not settle if there is a risk of being attacked by a dog."

Foxes are not too discerning about what they eat and they will often steal shoes, toys and garden hoses, though seven years ago a rogue fox which stalked the indoor floral displays at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show turned his nose up at prawn cocktail flavoured crisps left on a stand.