

FOX HABITAT

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A fox, regardless whether conditioned as a rural, urban or suburban animal, has three basic requirements. First, it needs a secure 'earth' or 'den'. A rural fox will generally opt for a well camouflaged location as a home, preferably a tunnel beneath undergrowth, in a bank or between tree roots.

For an urban or suburban fox, suitable accommodation can be something as simple as an overgrown garden, the base of a shed or a railway embankment. School grounds are attractive and most have foxes living on the premises, for the very good reason the foxes have vacant possession for much of the time.

Many schools have 'temporary' or portacabin-type classrooms with a void beneath, and these are excellent places to lie in wait for the abandoned crisp packet, fallen Mars Bar, or to enjoy the peace and quiet of evenings, weekends and school holidays.



Some folk refuse to accept wildlife belongs in their urban or suburban areas and suggest urban foxes should be 'returned to the wild'. But they already *are* in the wild - just a different type of wild - and they're not going away!

Pigeons, starlings and squirrels were once exclusively rural. Yet they, as well as badgers, kestrels, muntjac deer and sparrow hawks, make a good living deep inside our towns and cities today. If an animal can survive - it belongs.

It is, in any event, entirely unfeasible to consider removing an entire species from any location. Any such operation would cost a fortune and would have no possible chance of success.

Neither would it receive official funding or backing, as the fox is not - and never has been - classified as 'vermin' by DEFRA (the only body legally able to classify an animal as such). That consideration alone denies the animal is either dangerous or carries a threat of disease.

Research has shown that up to 75% of fox cubs in the London area are born beneath garden sheds. As the courting and breeding seasons coincide with late winter and early spring, when we have little use for our gardens, their presence may go entirely unnoticed and will suffice for so long as it takes to raise cubs from infancy.

An adult suburban fox's territory may consist of around 80 to 120 gardens, plus associated open space such as railway embankments, woodland, parks and schools.

Following the breeding season, such a territory may contain up to 10 foxes, including cubs, and the group may have three or four earths within that range.

As cubs develop and competition for food and territory increases, fox families need to break up, with cubs spreading out to surrounding territories. Few will disperse more than a few miles from their place of birth, but this is enough to give everyone that vital extra space.

When one considers over half the fox population dies each year, it becomes apparent there is always plenty of vacant territory to absorb dispersing juveniles.

A second factor essential to foxes - and to all of us - is water. If there are no streams, canals or rivers nearby, the presence of garden ponds, swimming pools, birdbaths etc., are sufficient to satisfy this essential need.

More difficult to guarantee is a food resource. However, The Fox Project has rescued around 7000 foxes in its 20 years history and has yet to find a starving adult fox. Logically, an animal as smart as a fox is unlikely to remain, and breed, in an area with no food resource.

Some folk suppose urban foxes do not know how to hunt, but, while scavenging is preferable, and uses less energy than hunting, urban and suburban foxes are just as adept at hunting rats, mice, voles, rabbits and birds as their country cousins.

Conversely, rural foxes are just as dependent on scavenged food as their city counterparts. Although a necessary skill, particularly when more easily acquired food is unavailable, hunting is unlikely to be the preferred way of life for any fox.

The fox population is generally self-regulating, refusing to overcrowd and breeding back virtually to the same number lost over the previous twelve months.

There is no reason to suppose the population is increasing and, in fact, in the south east, current numbers are estimated as being around 10% lower than in 1998.

For more information on fox ecology, the book "Urban Foxes" is available to order on 01892 824111.