

London, a playground for 10,000 urban foxes

August 27 2013, by Jacques Klopp



A fox runs in the Field of Remembrance in London's Westminster Abbey on November 11, 2004. To some, London's 10,000 foxes are a delightful reminder that this concrete wilderness is teeming with wildlife.

To some they are a nuisance, even a danger. To others, London's 10,000 foxes are a delightful reminder that this concrete wilderness is teeming with wildlife.

The ruddy brown creatures seem out of place on the streets of the British capital—but they are now so common that 70 percent of Londoners will have seen one slinking around in the last week, according to a recent survey.

For some city-dwellers, the [red fox](#) is the ultimate nightmare neighbour.

Many a Londoner will have had a night's sleep ruined by a fox's eerie screeching, only to wake and find their rubbish bins have been upturned. To add insult to injury, the scavenging fox will have left a stench of musk behind.

With their flashing eyes and razor-sharp teeth, the foxes have even been characterised as a menace.

There have been a spate of reports of babies attacked in their cots by foxes in recent years, though animal rights campaigners say the dangers are wildly exaggerated.

In June, London's mayor Boris Johnson reignited a long-running debate over whether the animals should be culled—by jokingly suggesting that the traditional sport of fox hunting, outlawed in Britain since 2005, should be legalised in the capital.

"This will cause massive unpopularity and I don't care," said the colourful mayor, who said he was driven to speak out after his cat was apparently attacked by one of London's foxes.

"If people want to get together to form the fox hounds of Islington (a leafy north London borough), I'm all for it."

There are some 33,000 [urban foxes](#) in Britain and a third reside in the capital, according to research by Bristol University. A further 250,000

live in rural areas.

"They are adaptable animals which can eat many kinds of food and are by nature opportunists," said Calie Rydings of the animal charity RSPCA.

"So it is not surprising that they can be found in some towns and cities."



Graphic on the red fox, a wild animal that has adapted well to London's urban environment.

With its large parks as well as thousands of houses with private gardens, London is a paradise for foxes.

They have been a part of the city landscape since the 1930s, when the urban sprawl began to encroach on their rural territory.

Despite the complaints, the foxes have mostly cohabited happily with their human neighbours.

Some 86 percent of people like the animals, according to a poll for Channel 4 TV. Another survey by Bristol University found that 10 percent of Londoners regularly feed them.

Britain has some of the highest-density fox populations in the world, according to Stephen Harris, professor of environmental sciences at Bristol.

"Despite this, they cause remarkably few problems and the vast majority of householders like to see the foxes in their garden," he told AFP.

Yet every few years, a case hits the headlines that sparks an outcry against the foxes and a slew of calls for the animals to be culled or moved to the countryside.

In 2010, an east London mother spoke of her "living nightmare" after her nine-month-old twin girls were mauled by a fox as they slept in their cots.

In February, a one-month-old baby boy had his finger ripped off.

But animal charities say such attacks are extremely rare—and in some case, foxes are not even the culprits.



A fox looks through a gate at the Royal Courts of Justice in central London on September 23, 2003. There are some 33,000 urban foxes in Britain and a third reside in the capital, according to research by Bristol University.

Trevor Williams, director of the Fox Project charity, said he knew of three reported 'attacks' by foxes on babies in eleven years—but claims one was actually carried out by the family's own dog.

"According to neighbours, the second also involved a dog. The third story was so full of contradictions, few people believe it," he told AFP.

Even if the stories are true, Williams claimed, the rate of attacks is nothing compared to the 250,000 people bitten by pet dogs each year in Britain.

The biggest threat, according to the RSPCA, is to the foxes themselves.

The average life expectancy of an urban fox is only two years, compared to four years in captivity.

Cars are responsible for 60 percent of their deaths. The rest die from illness or are killed by around 100 marksmen authorised to shoot [foxes](#) in London.

Three years ago, there was an uproar after a video emerged showing four masked men bludgeoning a fox to death with a cricket bat in a London park.

But it turned out to be a hoax. The perpetrators, film directors Chris Atkins and Johnny Howorth, had faked the killing in a bid to highlight the "ludicrous media coverage" of fox attacks.

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