

Life of the fox

Know your enemy - some facts about the fox for those keeping hens.

So you have your three or four hens in the back garden. Their happy, you're happy, the kids enjoy them and the eggs are great. Why didn't you do this before? Then disaster; all that remains of the chickens is a couple of bloody bodies. The kids are traumatised and you're shocked. This was supposed to be reconnecting with nature not turning the garden into a slaughterhouse. The offender is, of course, the fox.

Your irritation rises, why did it kill all of them. One would have been bad enough but it's killed the lot. Such words as, indiscriminate, gluttonously excessive, weapon of mass destruction pass through your mind as your anger increases. Before you apply for a firearms certificate or consider a pack of hounds in your garden take time to view your enemy; the fox.

The fox's lineage

Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) are a branch of the Canidae family. This family includes coyotes, dogs, foxes, Jackals and wolves. They are found on all continents other than Antarctic, (it is thought that the Dingo, a wild dog in Australia, was introduced in prehistoric times, while the fox was introduced by settlers to control the rabbit which was also introduced by settlers). Most people consider the fox to be a rural dweller. However foxes are very adaptable and have a diet and behaviour that finds them in the most unlikely habitats.

The strange and eerie fox call

From December to February you will hear their calling if you live in a rural area and go out at dusk or after dark. It is a weird call with a sometimes almost human quality to it. (You can listen to a fox call at www.angelfire.com/ar2/thefoxden/sounds.html) At this time of year foxes are on the move, looking for mates. Like humans, some foxes mate for life, however each year there will be a number of young and disillusioned foxes looking for new mates.

Fox cubs

During this period they can travel vast distances. Although normally territorial, it seems that these boundaries, which anyway overlap, are forgotten about December through to end of February. In urban areas, probably because of the greater food supply, this mating period can go on to April. The gestation period for a fox is 51-52 days. The fox cubs are born blind and for two weeks the vixen does not leave them. During this period the dog fox will bring food for the vixen. Sometimes there is a helper. This is normally a female cub from the previous year that does not have a mate of her own. The helper will also bring food for the vixen and if, for some reason the vixen dies, will take over the role of looking after the cubs.

Fox dens

Foxes live in dens. They will often have several dens within their territory. In rural areas these could be old, or sometimes-even part of a used badger set, or enlarged rabbit holes. There will usually be one secure den with a number of entrances and a few smaller dens. It is not unusual for the vixen with cubs to move; from the secure den to one of her other dens while the cubs are only a month or two of age. Nobody is sure why they regularly do this. As well as dens, foxes have scrapes, shallow depressions in which they may spend daylight hours, especially when they were not looking after a litter of cubs.

Urban foxes in an alien environment

In urban areas there is also plenty of places for foxes holes, often in the leafy suburbs in the bigger gardens. Probably because of the greater food supply the density of foxes in urban areas is greater. This has led to outbreaks of mange. Occasionally here at the Welsh Poultry Centre in Carmarthenshire, we'll see a sharp increase of what are obviously urban foxes. They lack the cautiousness of our local rural foxes and are often covered in

Mange.

They are apparently dumped out here by well meaning people who catch them in Swansea or Cardiff. I suppose they believe that they are in someway returning the fox to the wild. Unfortunately these animals have changed considerably from their rural cousins; they have learnt new ways of finding food, being a lot more of a scavenger. They don't survive in the country and resort to easy targets such as poultry in the farmyard. Unfortunately for them farmers tend to have guns. They don't last long out here just as the rural fox wouldn't last long if suddenly dumped in a city. Apparently, already, the jaw of an urban fox has developed a different shape, better suited to getting into cans!

Feeding
habits of foxes

Foxes are omnivorous. In rural areas they will normally feed on fruit, birds, small insects, earthworms, beetles, rats. Foxes normally hunt between dusk and dawn. They appear to have regular haunts and can often be found in roughly the same place at the same time. Hence, they may check out a poultry shed every night probably looking for mice or rats that the poultry house attracts. Of course the night you fail to shut them up its jackpot time for them.

One bite on the neck and usually the head is off. In urban areas they have adapted to preferring there chicken cooked, KFC style. A survey done in 1981 by Harris of the stomach contents of 571 foxes in London found that over 50% was vegetable matter; such things as potato peelings cooked carrots, cooked peas, apple cores ect. They are truly opportunists and it is this that has led to them being so successful. They are also not wasteful. When they do get into a chicken coop they will often kill all the birds. However, given time they would also come back for each body, take it away and bury it for later. Just as we humans used to 'put down' our harvest into storage, for the winter months when food was scarce. Again they are just taking advantage of an opportunity.

Young cubs
fending for themselves

The cubs will start to fend for themselves in June, July time. It is estimated that only half of the five or six fox cubs will survive

their first winter and it is these animals that often cause the greatest damage, probably out of desperation. They can be particularly bold, often attacking during day light hours. We had 50 meat birds taken one late June afternoon; I watched as she came back twice to recover more bodies. Those organic meat birds were ready for slaughter and would have gone the next day. They were worth around £500 to me. The second visit was her last I'm afraid.

Foxes are wonderful, adaptable, graceful, beautiful creatures. When they eat our chickens they are doing what they are so good at; taking advantage of an opportunity and you can't really blame them for that.

Steve Merritt, The Welsh Poultry
Centre, www.welshpoultrycentre.co.uk