

Solving conflicts with foxes

What to do about the most common fox concerns



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While the fox is an animal many people may least expect to see in their communities, both the red and gray foxes are common inhabitants of our cities and towns. They are generalists who are well-adapted to urban living and able to exploit a wide range of natural and human-provided food. They generally avoid people, but the lure of easy food, such as pet food or unsecured garbage, can result in more frequent backyard visits.

Removing attractants (e.g., not leaving pet food outside, securing garbage, closing-up spaces under decks, etc.) will go a long way in reducing potential conflicts with foxes. Prevention is always the best solution!

If there is a conflict, typically the best thing to do is to leave them alone, but here's what to do about the most common fox concerns:

Fox under a porch, deck or shed

Dens under porches, decks or sheds are not uncommon in urban areas. If you find a fox family in an inconvenient spot, consider allowing them to stay until the young are old enough to begin accompanying their parents on foraging outings. At this point they are nearly ready to say goodbye to their den and move on for good.

Fox kits are born in the spring, usually in March or April, and you'll see them emerge from the den about four or five weeks after birth.

At nine weeks, or somewhere around May-June, they will begin to hunt and forage with their parents. That's the moment to watch for, as it is then safe to encourage them to leave the den site if there is reason to hasten their departure.

If the animals absolutely must be evicted, humane harassment strategies can encourage them to leave. However, be aware that if you use these techniques during baby season, the young may be unable to move away from the irritants on their own and the parents will have a very strong fidelity to their young and the den-site, making it more difficult for you and more stressful for the foxes.

Fox under a porch, deck or shed (continued)

The following tactics are most effective when they are used in concert as part of a comprehensive plan to encourage the foxes to move on. The purpose of these techniques is to make the parents uncomfortable enough to move the litter to a more secure location. Once the den has been abandoned, make sure all the kits are out of the den before any permanent exclusion is put in place:

- Place dirty, sweaty socks or rags sprinkled with cider vinegar inside the den entrance, along with a blaring radio. This makes the foxes uncomfortable and helps motivate them to move on.
- Sprinkle a capsaicin-based repellent (such as Critter Ridder) or used kitty litter around the entrance and mix it with the dirt before loosely filling the hole. Capsaicin-based repellents irritate the eyes, nose and mouth of most animals (including humans) and can be a highly effective repellent.
- Attach Mylar balloons to weights and place them 3 feet off the ground around the den opening. Shiny balloons bobbing in the wind can enhance the harassment effect.
- Never use moth balls or ammonia to harass wildlife. The chemicals released are harmful to both humans and animals.

Foxes and rabies

Although foxes sometimes succumb to rabies, the good news is that the fox strain of the disease has not been transmitted to a human in the US in the last 20 years. Luckily, post-exposure treatment is 100% effective if promptly administered before symptoms occur. Having your domestic animals vaccinated is the most important thing you can do to protect them, yourself and others against rabies.

Abnormal behaviors that might indicate rabies include partial paralysis, circling, staggering as if drunk or disoriented or self-mutilating, or if the fox exhibits unprovoked aggression or unnatural tameness.



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Foxes and pets

Keeping cats safe: A typical adult cat is almost the same size as a fox and has a well-deserved reputation for self-defense, so foxes are generally not interested in taking such cats on. Kittens and very small (less than five pounds) adult cats, however, could be prey for a fox.

The best way to avoid encounters between foxes and cats is to keep your cats indoors—a practice that will keep your cats safe from other hazards as well, such as traffic, disease and fights, to mention only a few.

What about dogs? Most dogs are not at risk from an attack by a fox unless they have threatened its young, but they still should not be left outside unattended for a host of safety reasons, including harassment or dog-napping.

Miniature dogs are especially vulnerable to harm from any number of predators, though, including foxes, so they should be even more closely monitored when outside.

Protecting small animals: Pets such as rabbits and guinea pigs should be kept indoors for their health and safety, especially at night. If kept outside in the day, they should be housed in structures that are secure enough to keep out both bird and mammalian predators.

Poultry should be protected with sturdy hutches or pens built to withstand any break-in efforts by foxes, raccoons or dogs.

Fencing: As foxes and other predators can dig under fences, you should bury an L-shaped footer around the outer perimeter of an enclosure for animals who will be left unattended. Electric fences may be useful when combined with other permanent perimeter fencing. Place a single-strand of electrified fence about four inches off the ground a foot or so in front of a chain link or similar fence. Always check on local ordinances when considering electric fences.



PHOTO BY TOM MANGELSEN



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Foxes out during the day

It is perfectly natural behavior for a fox to be outside during the day, especially during the spring and summer when they are busy hunting rodents to feed their young. Simply because a fox is active during the day doesn't mean the animal is rabid.

Brazen Fox

Foxes may lose their natural fear of people when they find free sources of human-associated food (e.g., pet food left on porches, unsecured garbage, etc.) in neighborhoods and have repeated contact with people with no negative consequences. You can teach an overly bold fox to be wary of people by using negative conditioning or “hazing.” To do that, be big and scary: Raise your arms over your head, yell or blow a whistle and bang metal pot tops together as you move toward the animal or spray the animal's hindquarters with a hose or water gun. Hazing works best if you keep the negative reinforcement going until you deter the fox from where they are unwanted.

Why not set a trap?

Trapping and removing animals rarely if ever solves problems with wildlife. Even in studies where all the foxes were trapped out of an area, others from the surrounding area quickly moved into the vacated niche. In addition, trapping often leads to starving young being left behind. It's much more effective to exclude wild animals from where they're not wanted rather than trying to remove all animals that may be attracted to a good food source or den/nest site.

Find out more information at humanesociety.org/foxes.



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