



Friend or foe?

Anita Kelsey explores the relationship between cats and urban foxes, and questions whether they're a threat to our feline companions.

With an estimated 33,000 urban foxes living in UK towns and cities, it's likely that you have at least one local fox visiting your area.

But the fox gets a very raw deal in the 21st century. From being blamed for ripping open every city dweller's plastic bin liner, overturning every dustbin, every cat attack or cat death that occurs at night, through to news reports of attacks on people, it's no wonder the fox is mainly associated with negative press. But when did the fox fall so far out of human favour?

Let's first understand some simple facts about the fox, starting with the very basics — their natural diet. According to The Wildlife Trust for Birmingham and the Black Country, foxes eat earthworms, insects, fruit, vegetables and a wide variety of both domestic wild birds and mammals. Most of the birds they eat are feral pigeons and small garden birds, and the most frequently eaten mammals are generally field voles, which are abundant on allotments, railway lines and other grassy areas. According to the trust, it's highly unlikely that a fox would attack a cat, although possible. They say: "A typical urban fox home range can be occupied by upwards of 100 cats, and most of these are out at night. Foxes and cats meet many times every night, and invariably

ignore each other. When a fight does break out, it's often the fox that comes off worse in the encounter."

ATTACKS ON CATS

Vet Pete Webberburn dissected an ongoing study by Vetcompass, a not-for-profit research project run by London's Royal Veterinary College (RVC), in collaboration with the University of Sydney. The research project investigated the range and frequency of small animal health problems seen by vet surgeons working in general practice in the UK. Their data now covers 400,000 companion animals from over 200 practices across the UK. Over a two-year period, Pete's findings identified 14 cats

out of 10,000 with 'suspected' fox fight injuries. Comparing this with 541 cat bite injuries and 196 road traffic accidents, the data helps to highlight that cat fights and traffic present a far higher danger to cats than foxes.

Of course, fox attacks can happen on rare occasions and so they cannot be entirely ruled out. Twelve vet surgeons, based in London and country practices, were asked how many cats they had seen with suspected fox bite injuries within the last year. Eleven replied none. However, one vet, based at Amwell Vets in Waterloo, had a different experience to share. A fox in Central London had recently killed his 17-year-old cat. He thought this might have happened





with a fox, but we'd suggest it was so rare as to be insignificant.

"However, when there are problems, it's usually during the cub season (around April), when foxes — like all species — will take on anyone and anything to protect their young. As cats are notorious for curiosity, their concern is well-founded and we admit several cubs every year with serious cat scratches and bites.

"Over the 23 years we've been in existence, we've paid for around 15 post-mortems on cats suspected of being killed by foxes. In every case, death was from other means, usually a road accident. As foxes will certainly scavenge roadkill, sightings of foxes hauling dead cats across the road are regularly misinterpreted. Where small pets are concerned, one must remember the fox is a predator. If rabbits, guinea pigs and chickens are housed outside, a good quality pen is vital, because these are all natural prey to a fox. However, such concerns need not be felt for cats and dogs."

Penny Little, founder of Little Foxes Wildlife Rescue in Oxford, believes that many people misinterpret what they hear or see: "Most reports of foxes attacking cats are either a result of misunderstanding, or are malicious," she explains. "Foxes have many human enemies! But I hear so many stories from people, and sometimes it is obvious to me how the misunderstanding arises. For example, a lady rang me

because the fox was an opportunist and would have preyed on something it considered weaker — his cat, as well as being old, was completely deaf. The natural prey of a fox is not a cat and in most cases a fox would not attempt to kill a healthy cat, especially one that could defend itself. He was quick to point out that a fox killing a cat is highly unusual.

WHO IS THE VICTIM?

Trevor Williams, who runs The Fox Project, a Kent-based charity dedicated to the red fox, shared his thoughts towards this study: "It would be absurd to suggest that a cat never comes off worse from an encounter

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concerned that the family of foxes in the garden would hurt her cats. She explained that she had actually heard the foxes attacking her cats. A little probing made it quite obvious that what she was actually hearing was the cubs at noisy play — they make a lot of bickering and screechy noises when they play. She accepted this was indeed what she was hearing, and stopped worrying about the cats!

"I am absolutely convinced that foxes do not represent a threat to cats. I would make a small exception for tiny kittens, which could possibly be attacked purely as an almost reflex action of pouncing on a small furry animal, however, I know of no actual cases of this.

"Foxes are massively misunderstood. Their mating cries can, and certainly are, misinterpreted as the screams of, say, a cat later found in the road injured, although in actual fact the cat was in a cat fight — nothing whatsoever to do with the amorous foxes! Newspapers give ludicrous coverage to fox scare stories and so the myths build up."

Cats and foxes share space in London. Judging by the amount of foxes we now have co-existing in urban areas we pretty much wouldn't have any cats left if the fox saw the cat as prey. Maybe it's time for cat guardians to stop worrying about the moment their pet meets a fox outdoors. Cats and foxes may never be best friends, but maybe, just maybe, it's somewhere in the middle. ■

