



Fox (*vulpes vulpes*)

It is testament to the wily fox that we don't really know how many of them there are. Current informal estimates by the Mammal Society suggest there are approximately 430,000 animals in the UK. A recent study by Brighton University estimated 150,000 live in towns and cities with another estimate that 100,000 are killed on our roads each year. Most live for between 1 and 3 years, a vixen will weigh approximately 5-6 kilos and a dog fox about 6-7 kilos.

Counting fox droppings (scat) and earths (the burrow a fox lives and breeds in) has been used to estimate rural and urban populations. The basic premise is that foxes live in family groups and raise a single litter of usually 4-5 cubs per year. If you assume a basic family unit (before the cubs are born) is comprised of a dog, a vixen and a couple of subordinates (young from the previous year) it is possible to obtain a rough estimate of the number of foxes in the area based on how many family groups there are, then divide the number of foxes by the size of survey area to get the density.

Game bags are a convenient source of fox numbers in the countryside but do not reflect population density in urban areas. Foxes establish territories from as small as 0.2 square kilometres in urban areas to 40 square kilometres in hill country and the availability of food will greatly change across the countryside. Counting fox earths is easier in open countryside than in urban areas where they will settle beneath sheds, decking, railway embankments, derelict warehouses etc. I certainly see more foxes on the way into Lewes through Landport on my bike than I see out here in East Chiltington. My own survey of game bags in and around Plumpton and East Chiltington parishes estimates about 10 foxes a week are shot and that these numbers have remained about the same for the last couple of years. The Brighton University study found that fox abundance isn't linked to fox sightings. It is generally accepted that you must kill 70% of a given fox population before a decline is likely and that is never going to happen in an urban area and, despite culling being easier in the countryside, it seems to have no impact on numbers locally.

The red fox is an extremely efficient predator and survivor. Its antics with regard to hunting domesticated poultry, lambs and piglets has led to it being one of the most hunted of all animals.

Our view of foxes will obviously depend on our individual interaction with them. If they've had your bantams for lunch, eaten the guinea pig or poohed and weed all over your chamomile lawn you may curse them. Seeing a fox in open countryside before she sees you is a very rare and magical sight.

Most of us will have been brought up with some anthropomorphic foxy fiction, stories like Aesop's Fox and the Crow, Walt Disney's Robin Hood or Dick King-Smith's The Fox Busters, in which vulpical bantams drop eggs like Dambuster squadrons. These stories will undoubtedly help people form an entirely fictional idea of what a fox is.

In folklore and reality, where nature is red in tooth and claw, the fox is not totally villainous - often not too honest - but a thoroughly loveable rogue all the same.

You can hound me now you've found me
But I'm far more cunning than you
I'm a shy fox, I'm a sly fox
And I'll teach you a lesson or two.
I'll run you through the hawthorn hedge and tear your dogs to shreds
I'll lead you from the open fields into the flower beds
I'll lead you from the open fields into the nearest town
And take you to my hunting ground.

Steeleye Span

James Otway