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LONDON SCOURGE

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NOTES FROM THE WORLD OF LIVING THINGS

BY CONSTANCE CASEY



LONDON  
SCOURGE

The words we apply to the red fox—sly, cunning, clever—say more about us than they do about the creature. Foxes are no more clever than most other wild animals. “Sly” and “cunning” imply deceit and duplicity, which are more in our line.

We say that to be outsmarted is to be outfoxed, but the red fox is not really all that smart. What they are good at, according to Paul D. Curtis, a wildlife specialist in the Cornell University Department of Natural Resources, is figuring out where to find food.

Even without superior brainpower, foxes do have a couple of definite advantages that have kept them thriving when other canids, wolves the prime example, have been nearly wiped out. Foxes are generalists in choice of food and habitat. When their favored prey—mice, voles, rabbits—is scarce, they can survive on fruit, nuts, insects, frogs, snakes, birds, eggs, carrion, even grass.

The red fox is the most widely spread carnivore in the world—found in Europe, Asia, and North America, from tundra to deserts. This single species (*Vulpes vulpes*) has adapted to climates and conditions so different that it wouldn’t be surprising if its members divided up into different species. They’re even in Australia. Introduced in the 1850s, red foxes are now a threat to native small mammals, including the nearly extinct numbat. Australia has some seven million foxes and fewer than

a thousand numbats. The numbat, an animal you don’t hear about every day, is a termite-eating marsupial with a striped body and bushy tail.

Before the ascent of the fox, wolves were the most widely spread member of the dog family, but they proved vulnerable. Wolves are food specialists; they need to hunt in packs to bring down large, usually hoofed, prey. When the numbers of prey dwindle, the wolves are out of luck (though a desperate wolf will eat rodents). It’s a better survival strategy to be a solo hunter of reliably numerous small prey. It’s also safer to have a smaller body; it’s hard to shoot a fox from a helicopter.

Foxes are yet another in the growing number of wild animals that have discovered how rewarding it is to live in cities, where human beings discard leftover food. With the consistent reward of a meal, foxes have lost their fear and are increasingly comfortable in suburbs and cities, particularly in the United Kingdom. In the past 70 or so years, these elegantly adapted animals have moved into British cities, particularly in the south of England. (Foxes have made themselves at home in Oxford, where the 20th-century philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote his famous essay elaborating on the adage that the fox knows many things, while the hedgehog knows one big thing. For more on what the hedgehog knows, see the Species column in the April issue of LAM.)

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→ Foxes are now seen as a plague in London. A surprisingly large number of houses in the dense heart of London have suburban amenities—a fruit tree, a thick hedge, a garden shed—that are pleasing to the gardening homeowner and hospitable to the fox. (Urban fox populations in England began increasing in the 1940s with postwar sprawl. Foxes didn't appear in significant numbers in Europe until the 1980s. They're now so common and tame in Berlin that people mistake them for dachshunds.)

A friend in London reports that in the past three weeks he has seen two dead foxes in the road, two male foxes on their hind legs in combat, and a vixen scrabbling under the foundation of his house to make a den. For months, starting in December when the mating season began, he and his neighbors were awakened in the early hours by the eerie cry of a vixen in heat—disconcertingly like a human scream.

**ABOVE**  
This fox is at home a block from the British Museum in London.

Human beings not in direct contact with foxes are mostly ambivalent, leaning toward positive, about the animals. Fox characters are part of our culture—Aesop's fox and the sour grapes, and Joel Chandler Harris's Br'er Fox, to name a couple. In the Disney animated *Robin Hood* all the charismatic characters are depicted as red foxes. The hero of *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* has the voice of George Clooney. But our actions are often hostile. Red foxes have been extensively hunted as chicken-eating pests, bearers of valuable fur, and a pretext for people to call out the foxhounds and don very flattering tailored jackets and polished riding boots. British hunt clubs imported foxes from Europe in the 18th century to improve their sport.

The animals are beautiful. We feel lucky when we see a red fox trotting confidently along a country road, russet head erect, white-tipped tail streaming out. And you've got to love them for eating rats and mice. When a fox stops and gives you that sagacious, appraising look, it's easy to think that the animal does indeed know many things.

In North America, Cornell's Curtis says, there are few fox-human conflicts. The mass killing by the proverbial fox in the hen house is exaggerated, based on the fox habit of killing more than they can eat and burying the extra for leaner times. The fox can be a reservoir for the rabies virus, though most red foxes die from rabies too quickly to spread the disease. (Human beings are far more likely to get rabies from a bat or raccoon.)

It was long believed that, except when rabid, foxes were not at all dangerous to human beings. But an attack early this year on an infant in his bedroom raised panic in London. (The baby's finger was bitten off; surgeons managed to reattach it.) London Mayor Boris Johnson called on borough leaders to take action, calling urban foxes "a pest and a menace."

But what action?

A cull would be controversial, complex, and expensive. And it doesn't work. When fox mortality goes up, the females breed more often and have larger litters to compensate. A University of Bristol study found that, contrary to widespread belief, England's fox population has not increased since the 1980s. The fox population is relatively stable; there are just more foxes willing to live beside people.

It's human, not animal, behavior that has to change. City dwellers need to reduce the sources of food and shelter.

Curtis says it's highly unlikely that New York or Toronto or Chicago will ever wind up as fox filled as London. Why? The answer is the other animals native to North America. Coyotes and bobcats not only compete with foxes for territory and prey, they also eat them. Some borough leader, pressured by London's mayor, may consider importing coyotes and bobcats. It's safe to say that this would be at least as unwise as introducing foxes into Australia. ●