Talking about foxes

So what can, or even should, be done to manage urban foxes?

Legally there are three culling options – cage trap and despatch, controlled shooting and despatch. Although the latter is a legal remedy, it is not recommended for urban areas due to the risk of catching non-targets such as pets.

Non-lethal options

Non-lethal options include various repellents but, according to pest controllers at the event, these need to be used with care. Most are based on fox urine and that can actually end up encouraging the fox to visit the garden more often to make its mark and repel what it thinks is an intruder.

Exclusion is the method favoured by Gary Williams, not that he is against shooting or trapping per se: “Culling individual nuisance foxes that are exhibiting abnormal behaviour is necessary,” he says. “One example was at a Wolverhampton school where a fox was mugging the kids for their packed lunches. To my mind this is abnormal fox behaviour caused by ignorance in the human population – once someone has fed a cub they’ve effectively signed its death warrant.”

Everyone agreed that attempting to cull all the urban foxes in a specific area was a non-starter. Apart from the likely public outcry from, say, a mass shooting campaign, such a cull would only bring short-term relief with new foxes quickly coming in and taking over vacant territories.

Whilst rural foxes are clearly territorial there is an argument that urban foxes are becoming less so. Certainly territories are much smaller and foxes get used to seeing other foxes on a regular basis. They are also now very used to seeing people and they have worked out that people generally pose no threat to them, hence they are becoming bolder.

There was also agreement that trapping and relocating foxes is plain wrong. Speaker John Bryant from Humane Urban Wildlife Deterrence summed up this situation well: “Translocation is opposed by DEFRA, Natural England and wildlife protection groups such as the RSPCA on welfare grounds and because it can spread disease. Studies have shown that taking juvenile foxes out of their own territory and releasing them results in 37% mortality within two weeks, compared with 5% of naturally dispersing foxes and that only 12% of ‘relocated’ juveniles survive more than six months, compared with 61% of naturally dispersed foxes. I know of a fox transported 35 miles which returned home in 12 days.”

What is abnormal behaviour?

Whilst most delegates agreed that culling nuisance individuals was the best approach, Mr Bryant raised concerns about what constitutes abnormal behaviour. He said: “Pest controllers accept that population control cannot be achieved by killing foxes, and that culling should be restricted to foxes which are behaving abnormally (eg the Hackney case). The problem is, what is abnormal?”

“Urban foxes out in daylight fifty years ago would have been regarded as abnormal and might have even triggered a rabies scare! But as more and more generations of foxes are born in urban areas, diurnal foxes are no longer ‘abnormal’. Foxes entering houses is not in my opinion ‘abnormal’ as I get frequent calls from mid-summer to November of foxes sneaking in, and even going upstairs for a kip on a bed, or running down the garden with a shoe or handbag. This is not ‘abnormal’ behaviour. It is in fact normal for such an adaptable canine born into an environment filled with...
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human beings, which directly or indirectly are a source of much of an urban fox’s diet, either through poor waste management or via deliberately provided food.”

He added: “I think any pest controller asked to ‘remove’ or ‘destroy’ any nuisance fox or fox family, should be duty-bound to explain the fact (as stated in DEFRA policy), that territories made vacant by culling resident foxes are rapidly colonised by new individuals.”

Lack of clear advice

One problem that was identified is a lack of clear advice for the public and councils about what can and can’t be done about urban foxes. According to delegate Steve Barron from London-based Pest-Go, the response from councils is variable. Some even tell the public that foxes are protected and therefore nothing can be done.

Steve has made a name for himself in fox control and had direct involvement when the Kouparris twins were attacked. He suggested that dealing with urban foxes is a specialist activity and not something that every pest control company should tackle. Trapping sounds straightforward but you still need to despatch the animal humanely and traps must be checked regularly since once the animal is trapped it is under the control of the pest controller and therefore governed by the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Shooting has to be done with the correct firearm – airguns are definitely not suitable for fox control.

Much of Steve’s work comes in from other pest control businesses on a sub-contract basis. He said that it was a win win as they can offer a service to customers but they don’t have to go to the trouble of holding the correct firearms certificates and so on.

Rodney Calvert from Natural England covered the key legal aspects of fox control whilst retired wildlife crime officer, Barry Kauffmann-Wright, outlined the role of a wildlife crime officer. He shared some of his experiences dealing with problems associated with foxes. These mostly involved fox hunting with one particular difficulty being when foxes decided to take refuge in badger sets. He also said that a surprising number of the general public will contact their wildlife crime officer when they have problems with foxes.

Know your wildlife crime officer

Picking up on this topic Gary Williams suggested that pest controllers planning to get involved in fox control should make a point of getting to know their local wildlife crime officer. “Liaise with them, particularly if you are planning to shoot a fox,” he said “Remember that reports of people with guns are treated very seriously by the police so if you don’t want a helicopter of heavily armed officers interrupting your next fox job, keep them informed!”

Researchers appeal for fox carcases

Among the delegates was Tilly Stephens from FERA (the Food and Environment Research Agency). Tilly and her colleague Kayleigh Hartley are researching into the parasites carried by foxes. To complete their work they need plenty of dead foxes. Kayleigh points out that they don’t want frozen carcasses because that kills the parasites but they can arrange collection. So if you have a fox carcass to dispose of here’s a great way to do so that also benefits research, call Tilly on 01904 462274 or Kayleigh on 01904 462619.

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