

Europe | London Journal

## **Forget the Hounds. As Foxes Creep In, Britons Call the Sniper.**

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The New York Times

DEC. 6, 2014

LONDON — The sniper arrived at sunset with infrared binoculars and a silencer in his tennis bag. He set up his .22-caliber rifle in the back of a Victorian townhouse, cracked open the glass door and pointed the shrouded barrel toward the far corner of the narrow garden. Then he waited, his right eye glued to the scope, as the last light leaked away.

It took less than an hour. A shadow crept out of the dark and into his field of vision. A crack, barely audible amid the roar of rush hour, and the target collapsed into a lifeless heap of ginger-colored fur.

“Baby scores again,” the sniper said, patting his rifle. He turned to his client, a 37-year-old mother of two who had come in from the kitchen: “Do you have a bin bag?”

Britain has the world’s highest known density of urban foxes, the result of their self-colonization in cities here since the 1930s. There are now more foxes in London than double-decker buses: an estimated 10,000 roam streets and gardens, often in plain view.

Like the raccoons and coyotes that bedevil American city dwellers, foxes mate noisily, leave smelly droppings, dig up flower bulbs, rifle through trash and occasionally attack pets or people. They have been vilified for killing penguins and flamingo chicks in the London Zoo, and, once, for biting off a baby’s finger.

“They may appear cuddly and romantic, but foxes are also a pest and a menace, particularly in our cities,” Boris Johnson, the mayor of London, said after the finger incident last year. When his own cat appeared to have been mauled by a fox, Mr. Johnson got so angry, he said he wanted to “go out with my .22 and blaze away.”

The subject rouses great passions in a country that invented modern fox hunting in the 18th century, but also has the world’s longest tradition of animal rights. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1824, nine years before the British Empire abolished slavery. Today a donkey sanctuary in Devon attracts more donations per year than the three most prominent British charities dealing with violence against women combined.

Clare, a lawyer with three children who also had the foxes in her garden shot, did not want her last name published, saying “there are probably more people who want to shoot people who shoot foxes, than people who want to shoot foxes.”

That is why Phil the fox sniper also asked that his last name not be published. “I don’t want anyone to do my tires or firebomb my house or, you know, dig up my granny,” he said, referring to a 2004 campaign against a farmer breeding guinea pigs for medical research, which included the disinterment of his mother-in-law.

Shooting foxes is controversial, but legal. Phil, 63, first considered it three decades ago, after a fox ripped off the head of his daughter’s guinea pig, which was kept in their garden. A plumber who likes to hunt, he has 10 guns in his bedroom safe. He tied a pillow around the barrel of one as a makeshift silencer and waited, but the fox never showed up. Then a friend’s two dachshunds were attacked, and he “cracked” a couple of foxes in her garden. “From there, it just snowballed,” he said.

His clients include tennis clubs, schools, urban farms and families, typically with small children or pets. (One woman hired him to avenge her Chihuahua after a necropsy found fox bites on its neck.)

He charges 75 pounds, nearly \$120, for the first fox and about £50 for every fox after that, disposal included. The cadavers go to a friend's maggot farm, where they are turned into chicken feed. "Poetic justice," Phil calls it.

But foxes have at least as many fans as enemies here. Some Londoners feed them regularly. Others wire up their gardens with night vision and cameras to stream videos online. Facebook pages like Urban Fox Defenders ("A page for those who are sick of the reckless and mindless demonization of our town foxes") have thousands of likes.

When 9-month-old twins Lola and Isabella Koupparis were hospitalized with face and arm injuries after a fox had entered their North London bedroom in 2010, their mother received so many online threats for giving foxes a bad name that she was provided police protection.

Some Britons have never entirely gotten over the 2004 ban on fox hunting, the kind where horseback riders in red blazers give chase with a pack of dogs. After some 700 hours of debate, Parliament chose the animals' rights over a very British tradition. The hunting lobby claims fox numbers have exploded since.

Stephen Harris of the University of Bristol, a self-described vulpophile who has studied foxes for four decades, says there is no evidence of that. He blames the tabloids for making people believe that urban foxes are now "as big as Alsatians" and their numbers are "out of control." As far back as 1973, a British newspaper warned that eventually a fox would kill a baby, he wrote in *The Guardian*. "It hasn't happened."

Indeed, fox numbers are believed to be roughly what they were in the 1980s, he said. If they are more visible today, it is mainly because humans have encouraged them.

On the same day that Phil was aiming his rifle down the garden, Sandra Reddy and Terry Woods were nursing three injured foxes at a sanctuary an hour's drive south of London with the aim of returning them to "their" neighborhoods. Charlotte, Carl and Beau, all presumed victims of dogs, cars or mites, were recuperating on a diet of dog food and homeopathic anti-mange pills. Apart from the foxes, everyone there is vegan.

"Killing animals is cruel; I wouldn't do it to Terry any more than I would do it to a fox," said Ms. Reddy, 53, who runs a fox help line and South London ambulance service.

"It's also pointless," Ms. Reddy continued. "For every fox you kill, another one will move in."

The evidence suggests she is right: Research by Mr. Harris shows it takes an average of four days until a new fox takes over vacated territory. "To reduce fox numbers significantly, you would have to kill 70 percent of them every year," he said.

Five years ago, Mr. Woods and a partner set up Fox-A-Gon, a company that offers "humane deterrence." Among other things, he uses a spray that imitates fox urine "so the fox thinks a dominant fox has taken over his territory." His most important advice: "Don't leave out food."

The trouble is that friends and foes of foxes live side by side.

At Phil's recent job, the family said it had locked away the barbecue, eliminated the compost and sealed the trash cans. But three neighbors put out nightly treats for the foxes. "These foxes have no boundaries anymore, and who can blame them?" asked Colin, the 52-year-old husband.

One came into the house through the cat flap and knocked over a vase. Another wandered in as his wife was having a cup of tea and stole a towel. They have punctured the children's pool, stolen Colin's flip-flops and attacked the family's cat, Sparky. Sophia, 8, no longer dares go to the back of the garden by herself.

One afternoon, her younger sister, Charlotte, then 5 months old, was asleep outdoors in a carriage when her mother dashed inside. She came back to find a fox staring at the child.

Phil, in his army trousers and camouflage jacket, comes every 18 months. "Rambo," Colin calls him. Sometimes he kills four foxes in one night; this time it was only one. "It's always sad when an animal dies," Phil said as he grabbed the hind legs of the vixen he had just shot between the eyes and slid into a black trash bag.

And even a sniper has limits. "I could never shoot a badger," he said.