

## Squirrels and foxes in the garden

Gardens are increasingly becoming a rich haven for biodiversity. Knowingly or unwittingly, we have created conditions that suit our residents and visitors - hedgehogs, butterflies, wasps and slugs. While it's tempting to start labelling them as 'pests and predators' or 'friends and foes', we ought to accept them for what they are, not what we'd like them to be.

Wildlife comes in many forms – including squirrels and foxes. I find the red squirrel feeding close to the kitchen window absolutely riveting, and we were fascinated watching a squirrel and kit scampering up a tree by the burn. We're very lucky in the Borders of Scotland to have so many red squirrels: this is one of the remaining areas in the country with a healthy population of reds. Even within the UK, it's estimated that there are only 161,000 Reds against 2½ million Greys, with three quarters of the Reds here in Scotland.

Greys have huge advantages: they're larger, weighing twice as much as Reds, and live longer, 7-9 years as opposed to 6-8. Perhaps the largest problem facing Reds is that they succumb to the parapox virus. The fatal disease is carried by greys, which are immune. Reds are British natives that cause less damage to birds and forestry trees, so steps are being taken to protect them and eliminate, or more realistically, reduce the Grey population. We have a long record of interfering with Red populations. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, landowners imported Reds from England to boost numbers. This policy was so successful that, in 1903, the Highland Squirrel Club was established to control the Reds, leading to the extermination of 82,000 over the next 20 years. The Reds became rare in many places, as they are again today.

Animal conservation is not as simple as it looks, and you do need to ask what the long-term effects of our onslaught on Greys will be. Human actions are eliminating countless species throughout the world: perhaps we should value the more successful and resilient ones.

I know this is a controversial issue, but whatever side you're on, Greys, not Reds, will probably be your garden visitors. They can be a nuisance, digging up bulbs and storing peanuts in the lawn. After caching the nuts, they don't consider filling the hole they make when retrieving their food supplies. It's quite easy to protect bulbs: cover them with a layer of wire net and put soil or a mulch on top to conceal it.

The holes in your prize lawn are more difficult, but be consoled: moles cause much more damage, believe me. Squirrels provide great entertainment, even if their fur is the 'wrong' colour; my sister, Jenna, enjoys watching their antics in her Glasgow garden. But if you want to feed the birds, you'll need strong wire feeders or ones designed to foil the Greys. Squirrels are a feature of our gardens, so, apart from discouraging their most undesirable activities, relax and give them breathing space.

In the same way, there's little point in railing against foxes. They are the last of our native wild dogs and are important members of our wildlife community. I can't pretend I'm always sympathetic to foxes, especially when I lose one of my ducks or hens. The victims are always the young egg layers, probably because they haven't developed the canny wit of the older ones. In truth, I can't blame a fox for sharing my taste for a succulent duck.

It's estimated that more than 5,000 of the UK's 33,000 Red Foxes now live in cities, like Glasgow, where their numbers began to increase quite steadily from the 1960's and '70's onwards. These urban specimens are every bit as useful as their rural counterparts: instead of clearing away the corpses of decaying sheep, they tidy up the discarded remains of a fish or

pudding supper. In cities, they scavenge around in rubbish bins and heaps for one third of their food, as well as eating worms, birds' eggs and wee rodents.

As a general rule, foxes are frightened of people and will rush away if they see you. Unfortunately, some folk put food out and try to tame them, and this obviously confuses the poor foxes and their unnatural confidence could frighten other people. Foxes will check out rubbish bins and possibly dig holes in the grass or flowerbeds while they're looking for worms and other invertebrates. Prevent this by keeping rubbish in a secure place and by spending a lot of time in the garden. If I lose a duck, I patrol the outer reaches of the garden, armed with a lawnmower, strimmer or chainsaw: that keeps them away, I reckon.

Squirrels, foxes and occasionally badgers have become part of the wildlife of our gardens, so relax and enjoy the added interest and dimension they bring. After a fall of snow, see how busy the garden is at night with all the different footprints.