

Even as urban foxes get bolder, people appreciate rather than persecute them, say psychologists

September 26 2024, by Blake Morton and Charlotte Hopkins



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For many, urban red foxes are a familiar sight in back gardens or city streets. Often, people delight in seeing them and the connection to

wildlife they bring. Others find them a nuisance, whether because of their smell, poo or loud screaming noises during the [breeding season](#). Some anecdotal reports indicate that foxes could be becoming bolder within cities—even [riding on buses](#), [stealing shoes](#) or taking naps on [someone's garden shed](#).

Our study for the [British carnivore project](#) shows [for the first time](#) that foxes within the UK are indeed behaving more boldly within cities compared to rural populations—but that most people remain tolerant of them anyway.

Foxes are vital to ecosystem health and represent an important "flagship" species for urban residents' connection to the natural world. However, bolder fox behavior could, in theory, lead to more conflict with humans, particularly as people encroach more on green space through increasing urbanization. It is therefore crucial to understand how to avoid conflict with these animals and explore positive ways to coexist.

[Stories and imagery](#) can play an important role in shaping our attitudes about wildlife. However, although foxes are often portrayed as ["sly" and "cunning"](#) in popular culture, it remains unclear how this might affect public perceptions. Identifying factors that influence people's [feelings and attitudes towards foxes](#) is important for understanding how we can coexist amicably alongside them.

Communicating information about bolder urban foxes through [press releases](#) and YouTube videos, for instance, runs the risk of people creating false impressions or sensationalized beliefs about fox behavior. This could undermine important conservation initiatives to protect the welfare of urban foxes, including efforts to avoid unethical treatment or persecution of these animals.

Foxy behavior

[Our recent study](#) tested whether messages about bolder urban foxes are biasing how people feel about them. To do this, 1,364 British people were randomly selected to take part in an online experiment.

Participants were not told what the study was about. Half were given stories depicting bold and cunning fox behavior and shown a short video of foxes exploring and solving food puzzles that we had left overnight in people's back gardens.

Other participants were shown relatively neutral content, including a video of foxes walking through different landscapes.

Afterwards, all participants answered 24 questions that enabled us to evaluate their perceptions of foxes, including whether they felt fox behavior negatively impacted their everyday lives.

The study revealed that content about bold and cunning fox behavior did not have a significant effect on participants' tolerance of foxes, compared to people in the control group. In fact, across both the experimental and control groups, 83% of people displayed feelings about foxes that were more positive than negative. This suggests that participants from the experimental group remained positive despite being made aware that bold and intelligent behavior from foxes probably explains their "pesky" interactions with people.

Previous studies have found that foxes are a very well-liked species throughout [much of the UK](#), despite other studies suggesting that attitudes are more mixed in [urban areas like London](#). Our latest study provides the most up-to-date evidence showing that this remains the case. However, as foxes continue to become bolder within cities, which our [previous work suggests](#), it will become very important to continue to monitor whether (or how) attitudes change towards these animals throughout the country.

Our results illustrate that the likability factor of foxes is deeply rooted and difficult to change just by discussing their nuisance behavior in a single setting. Although foxes are often perceived to be bold and crafty, our online experiments showed that most people remained generally tolerant of them anyway.

By giving residents more of a voice in urban planning, solutions can be designed to encourage people to coexist with foxes without persecuting these animals, such as how to dispose of our waste properly to deter bin-raiding. This, in our view, is great news for [foxes](#) and people.

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