It might not be rocket science but understanding wildlife behaviour is no less a science.

Whilst we tend to leave it to the academics, particularly those that ply their trade whilst sitting under wet hedgerows, the sheer number of foxes The Fox Project rescues and treats bring important insights, albeit observational and non-science based, that add to our knowledge of how best to respond to the needs of the species.

Over the charity’s thirty-year lifespan, both ourselves and the scientists to whom we listen and from whom we learn, have been able - thanks to improvements in technology and monitoring techniques - to constantly update and revise accepted wisdom about territorial behaviour.

This is vital, because, when we take a fox out of its territory for treatment, we need to understand the consequences for that animal when it is ready to go back home. Because home is surely where it must go.

It doesn’t take too much imagination to understand that moving a fox from its home range to a new location is fraught with danger. Not just from the law, under which such movements, if not carefully planned, technically
count as abandonment, but because an animal on unfamiliar territory doesn’t know the rules.

On its own territory, the dangerous dogs and threatening cats, the routes from A to B, the households that leave out scraps, the natural food sources and the secure and private areas where it cannot be seen are second nature. It knows the strengths and weaknesses of foxes on neighbouring territories and how much they will tolerate sharing overlapping areas.

The rules may change from week to week, as a fox dies or moves on and a new piece of territory becomes yours. And they will certainly change with the seasons.

A territory may be jealously guarded whilst you’re raising cubs, and fought over in the run-up to breeding season, when dominance is vital to your success in the mating stakes.

In the heat of summer, food resources are plentiful, and thick foliage provides plenty of cover in which to hide up. Cubs have grown into juveniles and families are beginning to disperse, as they must, for the benefit of the species and to reduce in-breeding. It’s too hot to hustle, everybody is laid back and territorial competition is not a big issue.

All of this matters when it comes to releasing a fox back on its home turf, and taking account of the season as well as the individual circumstances can make a difference. Knowledge is power. Will the animal do well? Has someone else taken over the territory, and the only way back for our fox is either to fight to regain control, or to be chased away?

One of the factors will be local knowledge. Does the person that drew our attention to the poorly animal in the first place know the fox well? If so, we can assume the fox is a permanent resident and, no matter how long it’s been off its patch, it will have a substantial advantage in getting back into its established pattern and regaining territorial control.

But it doesn’t matter too much if that doesn’t happen. If a more dominant animal has taken over the territory, then our fox will know enough about the surrounding territories to simply shift a few hundred yards down the road and find an alternative way of living.

And, of course, we’re putting a fully recovered, healthy fox back on its patch. It’s had several weeks of regular nutrition; anti-parasite meds have rid it of unwelcome passengers, and it is now the healthiest and strongest animal on the block! It doesn’t matter how long that’s taken. The bigger danger would be putting it back before it is restored to full health - still weak, poorly and less able to sustain pressure from competitors. Under those circumstance, it will almost certainly lose its place.

Not that that’s such a big deal. Territories are leased rather than owned, and they are seldom permanent. Fox populations are constantly in a state of flux and the nature of the environment – particularly in an urban area – doesn’t stay the same for long.

Old Mr Jones has gone into residential care. His garden is no longer a place to find a nightly sausage and a fairy cake, and that water-filled winter ditch is useless in the dry, summer months.

The bramble patch by the railway line has been cleared in order to build an office block and a team of consultants somewhere is making a fortune designing a bypass no-one really needs and which will go through the last strip of ancient woodland in the borough.

Who cares? We care! But a fox doesn’t care. A fox simply moves on.

Two of our rehabbers have witnessed these territorial comings and goings for themselves.

They come... and they go! Continued

Thank you Eileen, you will be missed

The Fox Project recently celebrated 30 years since it was established and one of its earliest, long-standing supporters was Eileen Harrington, who died in January.

She is always recalled in lectures given by our founder, Trevor Williams, when the subject arises about whether foxes should be in our cities or not (as if the decision was ours to make!)

Eileen once said of her South London suburb, “I don’t like it here, but when I look around at all the awful concrete and tarmac, I often think, if a wild animal can find a way to exist in such an unnatural environment, then I suppose I can.”

Judging by the very noticeable and positive changes in outlook towards wildlife we’ve observed over the past 20 years, we think that optimistic viewpoint is shared by many who feel otherwise isolated and besieged by urban living.

RIP Eileen and thanks for the thought.
Comfort was released a few years ago in early August, stuck around for two months and then disappeared.

Almost 18 months later, on Christmas Day, our rehabber found her sitting beneath the living room window looking for a hand-out. Whilst keeping a couple of metres clear of any direct contact, she whisked her tail happily, clearly pleased to see her old rehabber, took what food was on offer, turned up regularly for the next few days and wasn’t seen again.

In Casper’s case – and that’s him on the front cover - he was the only one of the release group to stay around and, unusually, whilst he could never be described as ‘tame’, he returned daily for the entire following twelve months for food donations. And then he, too, turned his back and disappeared.

Coincidentally, and just like Comfort, Casper turned up two years later - on Christmas Day - and, cheeky as ever, put his head around the kitchen door to see what was on offer!

I used the word ‘coincidentally’, but the Christmas season marks the start of the fox breeding season, when foxes of both sexes are checking out potential mates on neighbouring territories. Clearly, neither fox had settled far from their release sites, but both were checking out the local ‘talent’ and both remembered where the chef lived!

Those observations should provide some consolation to the many folk that contact us, sometimes in tears, worrying that ‘pest controllers’ have shot their fox “because we feed it every night and it had no reason to go anywhere else.”

Yes, it had a reason. And that reason may be more important than the food you provide. Wildlife has its own agenda and whilst the foxes will be glad of your help, they are never entirely reliant upon it. Nature is abundant. It will provide.

And, who knows, you may yet see your fox return - alone, with a mate or even with a litter of cubs.

**Territory is a moveable feast.**
the vixen’s ability to recover her, we don’t know, but she was too dehydrated and exhausted to take a chance of leaving her in the vague hope her mother would return once more.

With no clues as to where the rest of their families were, we had to consider Meera, Polly and Stewie as having been abandoned. It’s an odd thing, but foxes are rubbish at maths and, sometimes, when they decide to move the family, they take the cubs away one by one only to forget there was another still to collect.

When two little boys and a female arrived, emaciated and believed orphaned, they got the name The Coppers and, against the odds, we got them through by the skin of their teeth. And then we learned of a second female, taken in but not advised to us by a well-meaning, but inexperienced independent rescuer. By the time she arrived with us, the cub had seriously deteriorated, and it took round-the-clock intensive care to get her through. But now, there are four healthy Coppers.

Betty, Zorro, Megan and Bramble could only be described as ‘lostlings’, somehow strayed from their home earth. Darcy and Tweeie were seemingly collapsed beyond help, but they, like Dandelion, Doris and Lilly, responded well to treatment and are now as bonnie as can be.

Which brings us to Bonnie, found beneath a car bonnet in a garage and covered in engine oil. Cleaning her up wasn’t so much the problem as concern about skin burns, and she remains under close care and observation as I write.

The Colleens, a pair of emaciated sisters, were found with their three dead siblings and they, too, are fighting for their lives at this moment.

So, too, is The White Russian, a very pale coated male cub who was fitting severely on arrival. Pale fur is always a worry as it often seems to indicate serious, life threatening – and life-shortening – underlying issues. Hopefully, we’ll get his problems under control just as we’ve managed to stop similar seizures affecting Stavros, Lou and Toffee.

Badger and Geoffrey came in with dog bite wounds. Tanner got his head stuck in chain link fencing and The Stable Lads were found, seemingly abandoned, under a horse box, where volunteers fed them until the cubs were trusting enough to come close enough to catch.

There are currently 60 cubs in care, we’ve lost four that were beyond help and we’ve managed to reunite 23 with their families. Those are always the best rescues, because no-one can raise you as well as Mum!
Buying and Selling

Looking for a quality curio, a quirky collectable or something quite quaint?

We no longer have a High Street charity shop, but excellent items keep coming our way from donors, and we have a process of ‘triage’, whereby these are selected for sale on eBay, Facebook Marketplace, our Online Charity Shop or by auction through Bren’s Independent Fundraising Page.

Items on offer may include jewellery, handbags and accessories, figurines, mugs and plaques, cuddly toys, pieces of art, odds and ends and all sorts.

If you have suitable items you would like to donate, please call or email and we can talk about collection or, in certain cases, putting them up for auction and having you send them direct to the winning bidder, with postage paid.

But if you’re not in the business of selling or donating, come at it from the other direction and try buying at www.facebook.com/TheFoxProjectOnlineCharityShop.01 or bidding at https://www.facebook.com/groups/1565699587062490

Gallery
HOW YOU CAN HELP

Remembering

We rely entirely on donations from fox fans to keep the doors to our hospital open and our ambulance on the road every day of the year. But there have been times when a legacy has given us a leg up, propelling us forward in our work, giving us financial security and a chance to plan for the future. And we have big plans! Our vision to build our own hospital facility remains at the forefront. Legacies are important to our work and leaving a gift to The Fox Project in your Will once your loved ones have been cared for is the ultimate act of compassion to help our wild Red Fox, much loved by some but often misunderstood, maligned and increasingly vulnerable. A legacy of just 1% can make a difference, while those closest to you inherit the remaining 99% of your estate. It’s very easy to do. Just provide your solicitor or Will writer with our charity name – The Fox Project – and our charity number 1190070. On behalf of the foxes, thank you!

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Please fill in the above form and return by post to: The Fox Project, The Lodge, Kings Toll Road, Pembury, Kent TN2 4BE

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