

Shock Tactics



If you're serious about keeping the fox at bay then one of the most effective methods is to install electric fencing. Chris Graham discovers what's involved

"I had a disaster last night, the fox got in with my chickens and savaged five of them; the carnage is horrible and I'm devastated!" This is just the sort of distressing situation that Bob Taylor and his staff deal with on a regular basis. He runs a company called Electric Fencing Direct Ltd, based in Tonbridge, Kent. For this reason he spends quite a bit of time consoling owners who've been faced with the

devastating aftermath of just such an attack. It's just a shame that it takes the horror of such an experience to spur people into action when it comes to beefing up the protection levels for their birds.

One thing that everyone who keeps poultry should be aware of is that the fox is a cunning devil. The trouble is, they have time on their side; they can play the waiting game, all night, every night, for however long it takes! But it's not just rural owners who must be on their guard against these efficient predators. The 'urban' fox is, in many ways, an even more worthy adversary. Becoming ever more numerous in towns and cities, these creatures are streetwise, bold and confident.

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poultry enthusiasts seem to wait until trouble strikes before taking action, particularly as the trouble in this case is normally so ghastly. Clearing up after the fox has called isn't something you ever want to do twice.

But keeping poultry safe in the domestic environment can throw up a few practical problems, particularly if you want to avoid that utilitarian 'proud camp' look. Owners who allow their birds to free-range in the garden, or in an orchard or paddock close to the house, tend not to want towering rigid metal fences spoiling the view. These ugly structures (usually capped with electrified wire) are what's necessary to ensure a fox-free environment, but both the financial and aesthetic costs can be high.

Electrified netting represents a far less visually intrusive, yet still extremely effective, alternative to eight-foot high wire fences. It provides a simple and



A voltmeter is essential for monitoring system efficiency. This one costs about £60.

DISTRESS PURCHASE

It's unfortunate, then, that so many



convenient way of creating a free-range pen just about anywhere you want, without the 'eyesore' factor of a more permanent structure. The dark green lightweight plastic and wire strand construction blends into the surroundings and makes it easy to handle and completely flexible in terms of location; you can move the position of the enclosure as often as you like.

Of course, it would be wrong to suggest that an electrified netting fence provides a guaranteed barrier against foxes, and Bob's the first to admit that this is a claim he never makes. However, its protective powers are impressive. In the two years that

But in both instances the blame lay with Bob; he'd forgotten to switch on the power! And herein lies the biggest potential weakness of the system.

Human error is the factor which is always going to represent the biggest potential threat. Forgetting to switch the power back on after you've been inside the pen, or moving the netting, is all too easy to do, and will leave the birds extremely vulnerable. To make things worse, foxes have the habit of cruelly exploiting such mistakes; they seem uncannily able to sense when the power is off.

POWER OPTIONS

Talking of power, there are basically two choices available – mains or battery – and there isn't much between them in cost terms for the basic set-ups. But some people find the idea of a mains-powered netting fence off-putting, imagining that it's going to be dangerous and difficult to deal with. In reality, the voltages pulsing through the netting are exactly the same with both power sources; the big difference is one of versatility. Battery-power systems are 'stand alone', which means they can be rigged up just about anywhere you like. This is in contrast to the plug-in systems which are limited by the need to be connected (using a low-resistance 'lead out' cable) to a mains power socket.

However, whichever power source is chosen, the final result is the same. Both systems work in conjunction with a clever device called an energiser. This is used to convert the input power (be it from a battery or the mains supply) into a high voltage, low amperage pulse that is forced around the live wires in the netting. The current involved – around 6,000 volts – sounds scarily high but there's actually little risk to health at a practical level. For a start, the fact that the current is pulsed, rather than being continuous, makes the fence 'safe' but uncomfortable to touch; it's equivalent to the sort of static shock commonly delivered from car doors at the end of a journey. What's more, the on/off nature of the current gives whatever's touching it the chance

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that to remain operationally effective the current flow should never be allowed to drop below the 3,000-volt mark, and this is an aspect which users must keep a constant check on using an electrical meter.

A further variation on the power theme offered by Electric Fencing Direct is the use of a small solar panel, which can be linked in to the battery-powered systems ▶



Making a gate using an extra fence post makes getting in and out of the run easy.

to recoil and break the contact before any damage is done.

Also, it's likely that the current pulsing around most fence circuits will be reduced to 3,000-4,000 volts due to natural wastage in the system. A good proportion of it will leak away to earth wherever contact is made. Bob says

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GOOD MAINTENANCE

- Inspect netting daily
- Ensure 3,000V+ at all times
- Keep weeds and grass cut back
- Never trim close to netting
- Take care when pegging out
- Listen for tell-tale electrical clicking denoting loss to earth
- Maintain netting tension
- Reposition leaning posts

SAFE NOT SORRY

- Keep toddlers and children away from fence
- Always switch off before crossing fence
- Repair net damage carefully
- Ensure warning sign is visible
- Position on/off switch conveniently

Bob has been using this system with his own birds – he keeps a free-range laying flock of about 20 assorted birds – there have only been two occasions when there's been a problem with a fox.



Solar panel being set up to keep a battery-powered system charged.



Fence posts designed with 'tread-in' double prong which is a great help when ground is dry or frozen.



Stand-alone systems use 12-volt leisure/caravan batteries rather than automotive units. They offer great portability and operational flexibility, but need to be regularly charged.



Flexible posts mean netting fence is almost impossible to damage.



Electric fencing product choice is large, so Bob Taylor's Kit approach provides a simple option for all.

in a couple of ways. The more complicated option sees the solar unit acting as a trickle charge unit which switches between a pair of batteries, charging one while the other powers the fence. Then, when the 'working' battery gets low on charge, the system switches automatically, the charged battery becomes the power source and the spent one is then charged up again by the solar panel. The alternative utilises just one battery that's linked to the solar panel and is trickle-charged continuously. This system can run for up to nine months before the battery will have to be disconnected and given a thorough recharge.

STRAIGHT TALKING

One of the most appealing aspects of an

electrified netting fence, apart from its impressive predator-deterrence performance, is its locational flexibility. However, to ensure the most effective performance there are a few important practical aspects to bear in mind. Most obviously the fence must be a 'tight fit' with the ground otherwise foxes will find it easy to push

their way underneath; a particular problem if the ground is uneven or rutted. Netting of the sort Bob supplies features 12 horizontal strands that carry wires and are electrified (all the vertical strands are plastic so don't carry a charge). But it's important to note that the bottom horizontal strand isn't live, and is purely intended to provide convenient anchorage between the posts. Hooks are used to peg down the netting, and their spacing is determined

by the contour of the ground.

Keeping the fence more or less vertical is another important practical factor. Most systems rely on the use of plastic posts which are lightweight, durable and convenient. However, they're flexible too and this can make it difficult to create the tension that's needed to keep the netting upright. EFD's solution is to provide simple guy ropes which are used on each of the enclosure's corner posts. To enhance the effect specially made net struts provide tension on the longer runs.

Specifying the right system for any given situation has traditionally been a bit of a problem. Most catalogues are groaning with energiser and battery options and, in many cases, there's simply too much choice; it can all be very confusing for the beginner. EFD take all the guesswork out of the purchasing process by offering a range of all-inclusive kits based on nothing more complicated than the number of birds owned. So, for example, the standard 50m Kit is suitable for keepers with 2-7 birds, and is available in battery or mains-powered versions.

Each kit includes an appropriate length of netting (with bound-in posts), all necessary pegs and fixings, a carefully matched energiser, all electrical cabling and connections, an external on/off switch, a net repair kit, full instructions and, last but not least, an 'Electric Fence' warning sign. ♥

HOW MUCH?

Prices for a 50m Kit from Electric Fencing Ltd (inc. VAT)

Battery powered £168

Mains powered £174

Solar powered £372

EXTRAS:

50m netting £68

100m lead-out cable £40

Tread-in posts (5) £9

Net struts (5) £7

FURTHER DETAILS

Electric Fencing Direct Ltd, Lodge Oast, Horns Lodge Lane, Tonbridge, Kent TN11 9NJ, tel: 01732 833 976, fax: 01732 838394, email: info@electricfencing.co.uk website: www.electricfencing.co.uk