

Guess whose coming to dinner?

Janice Houghton-Wallace looks at the predators keen on your poultry

We protect poultry against many things - disease, inclement weather and malnutrition - but quite often, another important element of poultry keeping that we really should protect against, that of predators, is way down the list of priorities. I don't for one minute believe this is because poultry owners do not care, it is simply they are not aware of the danger.

The last decade has seen a vast increase in the number of free-range flocks and the image of birds running around in grassy areas, scratching amongst trees and getting back to nature is certainly compelling in modern society. However, this freedom does have a price to pay unless precautions are taken to protect poultry, for environmentally friendly welfare stops completely if birds are taken by a predator, and protection from predators and/or predator control is an integral part of good husbandry.

Check the henhouse

The predator that most poultry keepers need to watch is the fox. Reynard, as it is often called in children's books, is sly, cunning and shows no mercy. Usually the fox does most hunting when humans are out of sight, after dusk or early morning. So many people who lose poultry to the fox say, I thought I had shut the hen house up, or I was only a little late back home, or I didn't think foxes were around at the moment. In reality, foxes probably patrol a patch if not every night, then quite often. It's when humans have slipped up with the security that the fox seizes his chance. And depending on how desperate a fox is for food, daytime raids may be required. A vixen with hungry mouths to feed will eye up the situation if free-range birds are sitting around in the afternoon sun.

Another upsetting point with a fox kill is the number of birds that are slaughtered or maimed but not taken. This is a phenomenon called surplus

killing. It's a strategy whereby foxes kill excess prey when it is abundant and then bury it for use on days when food is short. When poultry is buried for this use, usually just one or two feathers are near the surface but foxes have such brilliant scent that they can smell a carcass that may have been buried quite deep down.

Badgers on the other hand are less likely to kill poultry but do if really hungry. They will even rip part of a hen house to get at the birds, leaving stunned fowl wandering around the pen after the attack, which no self-respecting fox would ever do. Stoats and weasels can also pose problems, especially with smaller birds and eggs. Mink are voracious and a hen house after a mink attack is a sickening sight. Although rats are considered a pest rather than a predator, they can attack young birds, even killing them. Rooks and crows will certainly go for any eggs outside on the ground and birds of prey, particularly sparrowhawks, will attack some of the smaller breeds.

The feared fox

But it is the fox that most people fear and a recent survey on mortality due to fox predation in free-range poultry flocks in Britain highlighted - as one would expect - the fact that free-range units are more susceptible to predation than intensively housed units. Questionnaires were sent to producers of free-range eggs, chickens, turkeys and geese in an attempt to assess the extent of fox predation in relation to the density of the fox population and farm management factors. On average bird mortality was less than 2 per cent for all the producers but there were marked differences between them. A higher proportion of



the egg producers suffered fox predation and more of these birds were killed than those of the chicken producers. This could be because the range area of the egg producers was larger than that of the chicken producers and smaller free-range hen flocks tended to make relatively greater use of the area available to them than larger flocks. Goose producers experienced higher levels of fox predation than turkey producers, the reason may be related to the difference in which geese can be caught compared with turkeys and the difference in husbandry techniques. More of the turkey producers had housing available at all times, rather than night only and the geese tended to be outside for longer than the turkeys. Only two of the goose producers used electric fencing, whereas nearly 50 per cent of the turkey producers did so. The survey also showed that there is little evidence that fox predation is linked with relative fox density.

So what can be done to protect poultry?

- Sturdy, predator and vermin proof housing overnight
- Permanently housed
- Fencing that goes into the ground rather than sitting on the surface
- Electric fencing

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- Clear vegetation around fence boundaries so that predators cannot hide
- Put broodies with chicks or growing chicks/poults/ducklings, in penned areas that can be netted from any bird attack
- Have a guard animal - introducing new or young birds gradually. This can be a trained dog, a llama if it has grown up with poultry, guinea fowl or geese. The latter two species will give noisy danger signals.
- Activity in daytime - working in vicinity, radio on in isolated pen



fox always come out at weekends or when you're at home.

To safeguard them outside electric fencing is certainly worth considering.

Electric poultry netting is simple to use and quick to erect. It is effective in keeping predators out and all types of poultry in, but also, it can be moved around easily to prevent damage to the land. For the smallholder kits are now available with green netting, in 4ft high 50 metre rolls. One net will be suitable for up to 6-7 birds. Additional nets can be added but the number of nets determines the size of energiser, so it is important to establish this when deciding on the kit required. The netting can be powered by either battery, mains or solar means. Animals usually approach and sniff anything that is new, so at that stage they would receive a sufficient shock to ward them off. The birds are only affected by the netting if their faces touch it but like the animals that you want to keep out, poultry soon learn to keep away from this boundary.

Know the law

Before taking any form of predator control it is essential to have a clear knowledge of the legislation that protects much of our wildlife. The laws are quite complex and the unenlightened could easily find themselves in court if they rush out and destroy all they consider to be a threat to their stock. It is wise to start on the premise that all birds and animals are protected with exemptions to control some of these species some of the time and others all of the time.

What are commonly referred to as pest species may be controlled, those affecting predation of poultry would include: stoats, weasels, rats, mink, feral ferrets, feral cats, foxes, rooks, crows, magpies, and possibly great black-backed gulls, lesser black-backed gulls and herring gulls in coastal areas.

Foxes are kept under control through shooting, hunting, snaring, trapping and lamping (night shooting). It is an offence to attempt to poison foxes and the responsibility of all those involved in

predation control is to ensure their methods are legal, humane and carried out with sensitivity and respect for other countryside users.

In most cases, tighter security measures with housing and fencing will be sufficient to protect your poultry but help with controlling predators can be found through pest control companies. Whatever you decide, do give predators some thought, for there is little that is more sole destroying for a poultry keeper than to find birds either destroyed or dying after a predator has visited.

The Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*):

Found in nearly all habitats including urban surroundings
Hold territories, size depending on habitat - 0.2 square kilometres in urban areas to 40 square kilometres in hill country.
Foxes can be heard calling (for mating) in the autumn - winter
Breed in January through to early March
Cubs are born in April - May
The cubs slowly become independent and after one month begin to fend for themselves
The hunting season extends from the end of August to early March

Acknowledgements:

Jamie Stewart, Gamekeeping and Wildlife Management Officer
BASC (British Association for Shooting and Conservation)
Marford Mill, Rossett, Wrexham, LL12 0HL Tel: 01244 573000
(BASC have Codes of Practice for snaring, trapping and lamping)

'Mortality due to fox predation in free-range poultry flocks in Britain' by Dr.R.L.Moberly, Dr.P.C.L.White and Dr.S.Harris. The study was supported by the RSPCA and the paper published in The Veterinary Record, July 10, 2004.

Information about urban foxes and advice on dealing with any problems can be found in Defra's urban fox leaflet available online at:
http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/rds/publications/technical/TAN_08.pdf or from the Wildlife Administration Unit on 0845 601 4523

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