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**‘The Urban Fox Is Here to Stay’: Foxes and
People in Bristol, 1930-1990**

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‘The Urban Fox Is Here to Stay’: Foxes and People in Bristol, 1930-1990



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Introduction

‘Exhibitionist foxes put on lunchtime show for startled Kingswood residents’, reads an article published on 22nd January 2022 on the *Bristol Live* website. One of the residents of the suburb in question proclaimed, ‘these criminals of the night are not just brazen by night but exhibitionists by day!’¹ Choosing to describe his amorous vulpine neighbors as brazen criminals, this fox watching suburbanite provides a glimpse into the deep-rooted tension between the two species, humans (*Homo sapiens*) and red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*), living cheek by jowl in the city. The decidedly natural act of animal copulation is out of place in this Bristol suburb where, regardless of human desires, it nonetheless occurs. The fox is seen as unpermitted, their actions transgressive of expectation and human reactions to their presence straddle a paper-thin line between amusement and irritation, adoration and detestation. This complex entanglement of human and vulpine action and reaction within the city strikes at the core of this dissertation; how human-fox relations in the city of Bristol have been shaped by pervasive yet malleable cultural conceptions of the urban, nature, and the sociospatial order of the city.

The City of Bristol in the Southwest of the UK is home to a large and well-established population of urban foxes. Prior to the 1994 epizootic of sarcoptic mange, an often-fatal skin disease that decimated fox populations in the mid-90s, the city saw the highest ever recorded density of foxes, a staggering 37 adults per km².² A national study of urban foxes of the depth required for profitable analysis of this never before historically examines topic was unfeasible in the form required of this essay, Bristol has therefore been used as a petri dish to examine the lives of urban foxes from the time they first entered the city boundaries to the late 1980s. Analysis shall end at this date as the 1990s mange epizootic constituted a new phase of vulpine life that falls outside the remit of this dissertation. It is hoped, however, that the present work may demonstrate the fruitfulness and scholarly value of urban fox history and thus catalyse further research into this largely ignored topic.

¹ Ben Bloch, ‘Exhibitionist’ Foxes put on Lunchtime Show for Startled Kingswood Residents (2022) <<https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/exhibitionist-foxes-put-lunchtime-show-6534912>> [accessed 28 February, 2022].

² Carl Soulsbury et al., ‘The Impact of Sarcoptic Mange *Sarcoptes Scabiei* on the British Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Population’, *Mammal review*, 37, 4 (2007), p. 290.

From the interwar years, British cities witnessed a significant ecological phenomenon as red foxes migrated into urban and suburban areas.³ Over the next fifty years, urban foxes multiplied, thriving and permeating deep into the heart of these cities in a migration so extensive as to be commonly termed a ‘colonisation’.⁴ This thesis will advance the argument that within the city of Bristol, relations with and attitudes towards urban foxes were fundamentally shaped by the human-nature dichotomy and its manifestations in conceptions of urban nature and the sociospatial order of the city. Foxes, by existing in urban space, transgressed human social boundaries and expectations within the city. By doing so, they illuminated how these lofty and often deeply conceptual cultural ideas functioned in practice. However, these cultural beliefs were not static or immutable but were culturally and historically constituted. Human conceptions of urban foxes in Bristol were therefore shaped variously over time by cultural change, individual variants in beliefs and life experience, and the autonomous actions of foxes themselves. Over the course of the twentieth century, the human-nature dichotomy was far from abandoned. However, its hegemony was fractured as opinions on the urban fox rapidly diverged. By highlighting and examining the influence of this concept, this dissertation seeks to emphasise the centrality of underlying and often unquestioned culturally acquired beliefs. If the much-needed shift to ecologically friendly cities is to be successfully achieved, these fallacious cultural conceptions cannot go unchallenged.

As Yrjö Haila explains, ‘it is commonly accepted that the western view of humanity’s place in nature is dominated by a dualistic opposition between nature and culture’.⁵ Various terms for the nature-culture dichotomy, human-nature binary and many variations upon these, it has received sustained scholarly attention since its reification by anthropologists in the 1970s.⁶ This pervasive cultural conception maintains that humans, by virtue of our culture, exist outside of ‘nature’, from which we are othered.⁷ The scientific knowledge that humans are, in fact, animals and that the divide from nature is more metaphysical than physical has never been fully assimilated into Western perceptions and continues to shape conceptions of, and interactions with, the world.

³ Stephen Harris, *Urban Foxes* (London: Whittet Books, 1986), p. 80.

⁴ Harris, *Urban Foxes*, p. 80.

⁵ Yrjö Haila, ‘Beyond the Nature-Culture Dualism’, *Biology and Philosophy*, 15 (2000), p. 155.

⁶ Davydd Greenwood et al, *Nature, Culture, and Human History: A Bio-Cultural Introduction to Anthropology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

⁷ Andrew Flack, *The Wild Within: Histories of a Landmark British Zoo* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2018), p. 2.

The urban historian Martin Melosi has explored the functioning of the human-nature dichotomy within Western cities and urban scholarship. He explains that cities, as spaces constructed by and for humans, are seen as the antithesis to the natural.⁸ This belief manifests in two distinct ways. Firstly, as geographer Chris Philo explains, it informs the sociospatial expectations and hierarchy of the city to which, all humans and other animals (a term that, despite its problematic homogenisation, shall be used in this essay for the sake of brevity to denote all earthly ‘beings’ except the human animal) are subject.⁹ As humans are seen to exist outside of nature and as the urban hence ‘belongs’ to the realm of the human, there is an expectation of human dominion in urban space. The high modernist quest for control over nature finds its home in the city.¹⁰ Secondly, the view of the urban as antithetical to nature has resulted in a narrative of declension in which nature and the city are deemed incompatible. The urban is hence considered ecologically sterile by default, with whatever relics of the natural persist considered degraded, profane, a ‘fallen’ nature, or the relic of a soon-to-disappear Eden.¹¹ From the 1930s, urban foxes in Bristol challenged both of these cultural expectations of urban space. Their presence in the city unpermitted, they transgressed the sociospatial bounds delimited for them. A ‘wild’ animal thriving in the domestic and unnatural city, a mid-sized carnivore living in intimate proximity to humanity. They existed in a liminal state and violated the nature-culture divide, laying its functioning bare in human reaction to vulpine transgression.¹² This dissertation will chart the variable role of these expectations in responses and attitudes to the urban fox in the city of Bristol from the 1930s to the 1980s, emphasising both their influence and their changeability. It is hoped this essay will illuminate the centrality of cultural beliefs in the acceptance of urban wildlife. In a rapidly urbanising world and a time of ecological crisis, the ‘greening’ of cities is essential for the

⁸ Martin Melosi, ‘Humans, Cities and Nature: How do Cities fit in the Material World?’ *Journal of Urban History*, 36 (1) 3–21.

⁹ Chris Philo, ‘Animals, Geography, and the City: Notes on Inclusions and Exclusions’, *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, 13 (1995), pp. 655-681.

¹⁰ James Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 4.

¹¹ Aleksandra Ilicheva, ‘Wild in the City: Past, Present, and Future’, *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, 72 (2010), p. 61.

¹² Clemens Wischermann, Aline Steinbrecher, Philip Howell, *Animal History in the Modern City: Exploring Liminality* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 2-6

maintenance of biodiversity.¹³ Unless the way we conceptualise urban space and our relationship with nature shifts, the task will be near impossible.

Historiography

This dissertation belongs to the dynamic and relatively young historical subdiscipline of animal history. The 1980s saw a cross-disciplinary ‘animal turn’ as scholarship awoke to the possibilities of studying animals.¹⁴ However, coming of age in the era of cultural studies, these early histories were often limited to ‘representationalism’, treating animals as cultural signifiers rather than as material beings and historical actors in their own right.¹⁵ This approach was famously critiqued by Eric Baratay who called for animals to be seen as individual actors embroiled in complex and interwoven historical processes and the field has since diversified.¹⁶ This dissertation refutes the need for a reactionary neo-materialist turn, as suggested by Timothy LeCain.¹⁷ Animal history need not decide between culture and materialism, the two may be profitably examined within the same work and hence not deny the importance of culture or limit the agency of animals. While a full treatment of the thorny topic of animal agency is neither possible nor necessary here, it is worthy of note that this essay refers to agency in its full ‘complexity and promiscuity.’¹⁸

This essay finds its intellectual home among histories which have sought to examine the nature-culture dichotomy. In one of the most influential works of this topic, William Cronon explains that ‘‘wilderness’ embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural... The place where we are is the place where nature is not.’¹⁹ While urban scholar Martin Melosi has rightfully highlighted the frequency with which scholars writing on the city fall back unquestioningly on this flawed cultural wisdom, there is a strong body of scholarship in which this

¹³ Kylie Soanes et. al., ‘Correcting Common Misconceptions to Inspire Conservation Action in Urban Environments’, *Conservation Biology*, 33, 2 (2018), pp. 300-306.

¹⁴ Harriet Ritvo, ‘On the Animal Turn’, *Daedalus*, 136, 4 (2007), pp. 118-122.

¹⁵ For instance, Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁶ Eric Baratay, ‘Building an *Animal History*’, in *French Thinking About Animals*, ed. By Louisa Mackenzie, Stephanie Posthumus (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), pp. 3-14.

¹⁷ Timothy LeCain, ‘Against the Anthropocene: A Neo-Materialist Perspective’, *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity*, 3:1 (2015), pp. 1–28.

¹⁸ David Gary Shaw, ‘The Torturers Horse: Agency and Animals in History’, *History and Theory*, 52, 4 (2013), pp. 146-167.

¹⁹ William Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, *Environmental History*, 1, 1 (1996), p. 17.

tendency has been addressed and avoided.²⁰ In his environmental history of Seattle, Matthew Klingle saw ‘humans and nature as tangled together’ within the city.²¹ In urban history, Peter Atkins’ work emphasis how ‘nature suffuses the city,’ explaining that through works of this nature, ‘the nature-culture divide itself has begun to dissolve’.²² As an animal history, this dissertation sits on the shoulders of urban animal histories such as Dawn Day Biehler’s work on pests and Etienne Benson’s study of grey squirrels in the United States who have addressed human-animal entanglement and perception in urban space through animal history methodologies.²³ This dissertation’s focus on foxes is seen in only two other historical works; Martin Wallen’s *Fox*, a cultural history of foxes and Lucy Jones’ *Foxes Unearthed*, a popular history of the British relationship with the red fox.²⁴ While the present work centres upon the same species as these two works, the analysis and content of this dissertation only infrequently crosses their intellectual paths. As such, by approaching the nature-culture dichotomy and its manifestation in the city through urban foxes as material beings, this dissertation carves for itself a unique avenue of inquiry, one well situated within a robust yet dynamic and still emergent body of scholarship.

Methodology

This essay utilises a diverse range of sources. As each chapter relies upon a different set of sources, each requires its own methodological treatment, as will be addressed throughout. One fundamental methodological issue encountered across the writing of this dissertation comes from its focus on animals. Animals are, in the words of satirist Charles Phineas ‘inarticulate’ and do not leave a written record of their history.²⁵ We must, therefore, search for the ‘animal trace’; the presence of animals in records of the past.²⁶ With regards to this essay, this has meant using the scientific reports of the Bristol Naturalists Society (BNS), BBC documentaries, scientific papers and even absence of sources itself as my primary sources. Despite the now established nature of animal

²⁰ Melosi, ‘Humans, Cities and Nature’, pp. 3–21.

²¹ Matthew Klingle, *Emerald City: An Environmental History of Seattle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. xiii.

²² Peter Atkins, *Animal Cities: Beastly Urban Histories* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 1-18.

²³ Dawn Day Biehler, *Pests in the City: Flies, Bedbugs, Cockroaches, and Rats* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013); Etienne Benson ‘The Urbanization of the Eastern Gray Squirrel in the United States’, *The Journal of American History*, 100, 3 (2013), pp. 691-710.

²⁴ Martin Wallen, *Fox* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006); Lucy Jones, *Foxes Unearthed: A Story of Love and Loathing in Modern Britain* (London: Elliot and Thompson, 2016).

²⁵ Charles Phineas, ‘Household Pets and Urban Alienation’, *Journal of Social History*, 7, 3 (1974), p. 339.

²⁶ Etienne Benson, ‘Animal Writes: Historiography, Disciplinarity, and the Animal Trace’ from ed. Linda Kalof, Georgina Montgomery, *Making Animal Meaning*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012) 3-16.

history, traditional archiving has not yet caught up, creating additional methodological problems. Despite this, by staying attuned to the purpose and providence of its sources, the present dissertation has uncovered the footprints of the urban fox in Bristol's history.

Structure

This dissertation will follow a tripartite, chronological structure in which each chapter represents a different 'phase' of human perception and vulpine urban existence in Bristol. Chapter one begins in the interwar years when foxes first entered the city or, more accurately, when the city first expanded to meet the fox. As foxes proliferated and spread through the city, their existence went almost entirely undocumented. In this period, it will hence be demonstrated that the hegemony of the human-nature binary in the city went unquestioned as vulpine urbanisation was unnoticed, unrecognised or unworthy of documentation. Chapter two resumes the tale of Bristol's foxes as their numbers soared and their presence received systematic attention for the first time. This chapter sees the commencement of contested meaning as Bristol's human residents reacted to their vulpine neighbours. In this period, the hegemony of the nature-culture divide begins to crack as cultural change, individual differences and the autonomous actions of foxes themselves shape perceptions. The final chapter commences in the closing years of the 1970s as Bristol's foxes rise to fame. Opinions polarise as the full spectrum of perspectives comes to fruition. The impact of the nature-culture divide shifts as its grip on the sciences and the public weakens but its potency in interspecies urban conflict remains undiluted.

Chapter 1- The Unnoticed Migration, 1930-1965

To untangle the tale of how, when, and why the fox came to reside in the city of Bristol is not a straightforward endeavour. Source material pertaining to foxes in the city prior to 1965 is scant, consisting of only two documents. In 1908, the first ever survey of mammals of the Bristol District was published in the *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists' Society*. It explained that 'in those parts of the district where the fox is preserved for sporting purposes, it is plentiful'.²⁷ This brief overview of foxes in the region centres around the solely rural pursuit of hunting, clearly suggesting that at the start of the twentieth century, foxes were not present in or around urban Bristol. When the follow-up to this survey was published 33 years later, however, a rather different situation was described. This report comments that the species 'occurs close to Bristol', recounting how 'on one occasion a fox got into the Clifton Zoological Gardens and killed a Barnacle Goose'.²⁸ In 1940, the fox was no longer wholly separated from the city. Though the situation described in this account is far from the modern-day abundance of foxes, it was also significantly different from 1908 as the species crept into the peri-urban outskirts of Bristol. The change evident from these two sources is indicative of a process known to have occurred in Bristol from the interwar years but for which there is very little evidence: the early stages of vulpine urban migration.

Due to the lack of Bristol specific sources, scientists such as Bristol based fox expert Stephen Harris wishing to trace the roots of vulpine presence in the city have been forced to look to London where the process was better documented.²⁹ The methodology of this chapter is therefore centered around extrapolation from London and utilising the absence of fox sources as crucial evidence in and of itself. The issue with this approach is that one cannot be sure that the events in London are generalisable to Bristol, and hence the validity of analysis for this period might be undermined. However, as stated, this approach has been taken by scientists such as Harris who have asserted their confidence that the two cases are comparable due to environmental and historical similarities.³⁰ Furthermore, often taking note of what is not documented can reveal as much about

²⁷ C. King Rudge and H.J. Charbonnier 'The Mammals of the Bristol District', *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 4, 11 (1908), p. 58.

²⁸ H. Tetley, 'Land Mammals of the Bristol District', *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 4, 4 (1940), p.140.

²⁹ Stephen Harris, Tom Woollard, 'Bristol's Foxes', *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists' Society*, 48 (1988), pp. 3-15.

³⁰ Harris, Woollard, 'Bristol's Foxes', pp. 3-5.

the past as that which is documented. In the case of Bristol's urban foxes, the silence is deafening and this appears to ring true. In the face of an absence of alternative preferable sources, the methodological choices of this chapter are, I believe, justified and effective.

The most thorough account of early vulpine presence in London is provided by the study of naturalist Bunny Teagle.³¹ The earliest sightings of foxes in London he presents date back to the 1930s when the species was spotted in large, open spaces such as Hampstead Heath, Richmond Park and Wimbledon Common in substantial numbers. A quote from 1937 explains that in the previous six years, one hundred and sixteen foxes had been shot in Richmond Park.³² Throughout the 40s and 50s, foxes proliferated, inching further into London's suburbs. As early as 1949, one Surrey hunt secretary explained that the fox 'likes to be as near to London as he can get', expressing perhaps even a burgeoning preference for their urban as opposed to rural habitat.³³ By 1960, they were an undeniable feature of London's suburban landscape. A similar timeline has been theorised to 'almost certainly' apply to Bristol, supported by unpublished resident surveys conducted by Harris.³⁴

The 'why' of vulpine urban migration is less clear and has long been debated. At the time the process occurred, residents were adamant the foxes were escaped pets or that they travelled into the city via often very tenuous 'green corridor' links with the countryside.³⁵ These theories are now wholly rejected. However, they provide an insight into how Londoners perceived the city and its suitability for a wild animal such as the fox. Their reluctance to believe that foxes simply live in urban areas as they provide a suitable habitat suggests that they did not perceive the city as suitable for foxes and hence theorised alternative explanations when faced with vulpine presence. The reality, however, begins with the interwar proliferation of suburban housing modeled on the 'garden city' ideal of low-density housing and abundant green space.³⁶ When it was constructed, this housing absorbed the countryside into the suburbs. Foxes residing in these rural areas became enclosed and, finding the neighbourhoods adequate, remained, adapting to human presence.³⁷

³¹ W.G. Teagle, 'The Fox in the London Suburbs', *The London Naturalist*, 48 (1967), pp. 44-68.

³² Cyril Collette, *A History of Richmond Park with an Account of Its Birds and Animals* (Wakefield: S. R. Publishers, 1971), p. 25.

³³ Teagle, 'The Fox in the London Suburbs', p. 49.

³⁴ Harris, Woollard, 'Bristol's Foxes', pp. 3-5.

³⁵ Teagle, 'The Fox in the London Suburbs', p. 48.

³⁶ Matthew Hollow, 'Suburban Ideals on England's Interwar Council Estates', *Garden History*, 39, 2 (2011), p. 203.

³⁷ Martin Hemmington, *Fox Watching: In the Shadow of the Fox* (London: Whittet, 1997), p. 40.

Studies have since shown that this type of housing is favoured by foxes and in Bristol, these interwar suburbs such as Knowle, Coombe Dingle and Sea Mills still boast impressive fox populations.³⁸ Once accustomed to suburban living, foxes became synanthropic, gradually progressing deeper into the city and occupying less favourable territory such as high-density housing areas and urban centres. The first step of vulpine urbanisation was hence a passive choice of a highly adaptable species to remain as the cities expanded to meet them. As Sean Kheraj explains, urban synanthropes are the ‘unintended consequences of urban development, the products of both natural and cultural causation that illuminate the hybridity of urban environments.’³⁹ The interwoven actions and reactions of humans and foxes demonstrates of the ‘complex and promiscuous’ nature of agency and the ability of nature to defy human expectation.⁴⁰

At this time, as evident from the sources (or lack thereof) available, human expectation was certainly not that foxes may remain in the newly constructed suburbs and migrate into the city. Urban vulpine migration was a major environmental phenomenon of the twentieth century which has been retrospectively examined by scientists, in popular ecology articles and in documentaries, for instance.⁴¹ That it went largely unnoticed at the time, then, does not reveal the intrinsic interest of the event, but contemporaneous attitudes towards it. The lack of documentation has three potential explanations: it was either not deemed worthy of documentation, not believed to be a migration, or was not noticed. If the migration was simply not deemed worthy of documenting by organisations such as the BNS, which are explicitly interested in the habitat and activities of animals, this implies that urban wildlife was not valued. As David Goode explains, science and conservation at this time glorified the pristine at the expense of places like cities.⁴² This perspective was implied by Teagle, who wrote that lack of documentation ‘would appear to be due to... lack

³⁸ Stephen Harris, Jeremy Rayner, ‘A Discriminant Analysis of the Current Distribution of Urban Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) in Britain’, *Journal of Animal Ecology*, 55, 2 (1986), pp. 605-611; Sea Mills 100, *Sea Mills and Coombe Dingle Wildlife During Lockdown* (2020) <<https://seamills100.co.uk/2020/06/12/wildlife-during-lockdown/>> [accessed 10 November 2021].

³⁹ Sean Kheraj, ‘Epilogue: Why Animals Matter in Urban History, or Why Cities Matter in Animal History’, from *Animal Metropolis: Histories of Human-Animal Relations in Urban Canada*, ed. By Joana Dean, Darcy Ingram, Christabelle Sethna (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2017), p. 316.

⁴⁰ Shaw, ‘The Torturers Horse’ (2013), p. 165.

⁴¹ Harris, Woollard, ‘Bristol’s Foxes’, p. 3, Wildlife Online, *When and How did Foxes Come to Live in Our Towns and Cities?* (2021) <<https://www.wildlifeonline.me.uk/questions/answer/when-and-how-did-foxes-come-to-live-in-our-towns-and-cities>> [Accessed 25 November 2021], ‘Twentieth Century Fox: Villain or Victim’, *Wildlife on One*, BBC One, 1981.

⁴² David Goode, *Nature in Towns and Cities* (London: Harper Collins, 2014), p. 285.

of interest... rather than to a lack of Foxes.⁴³ To deem urban foxes unworthy of documenting is reflective of the human-nature dichotomy and its impact on perceptions of nature in the city, casting urban wildlife due to its existence within the unnatural urban landscape as degraded, an impure nature. In the 1940s, residents in a newly constructed London suburb, when questioned about foxes, explained that they were ‘still found’ in their neighbourhood, as though the animals were a relic, a hangover from the bygone age of the rural expected to soon disappear.⁴⁴ This suggests that vulpine presence was noticed but wasn’t seen as sustainable. If residents did not believe or did not notice that urban migration was occurring, it was likely because they did not see the city as suitable for a ‘wild’ animal such as the fox. These possibilities similarly reflect the nature-culture dichotomy and its assumption of the city as ecologically sterile and hostile to nature. Perceptions of the urban fox from the interwar years to the mid-1960s were therefore a direct result of the pervasive human-nature dichotomy which had not, at this historical moment, been called into question.

The contrast between the reality of vulpine urban migration and the lack of attention it received lays bare the truth of the discordance between human conceptions of nature and the functioning of nature itself, which is not aware of, nor respects, the boundaries delimited by human expectations. As Philo explains, animals are placed within the sociospatial order of the city despite the apparent impossibility of them sharing in its meaning.⁴⁵ By existing where their presence was not permitted, urban foxes in Bristol violated this order. Foxes, by ‘wriggling out of the... wilderness allotted to them by their human neighbours’, transgressed the social order and violated expectations of the city.⁴⁶ They crossed lines, both of the metaphorical social boundaries and physically, by existing where unpermitted, becoming physically and symbolically ‘out of place’.⁴⁷ From the interwar years to the mid-1960s, foxes responded to human forces acting upon them as the intelligent, adaptable creatures they are, undertaking a hugely significant historical phenomenon and coming to reside in the city of Bristol. However, human conceptions of the incompatibility of nature and urban space resulting from the pervasive human-nature dichotomy meant this process went entirely

⁴³ Teagle, ‘The Fox in the London Suburbs’, p. 50.

⁴⁴ Teagle, ‘The Fox in the London Suburbs’ p. 49.

⁴⁵ Philo, ‘Animals, Geography, and the City’, p. 656.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Tim Cresswell, *In Place, Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 6.

undocumented. By 1965, foxes had penetrated deep into the urban landscape of Bristol, completing the unnoticed migration and awaiting their ascent to prominence.

Chapter 2- The Recorded Proliferation, 1965-1979

The period of vulpine ignorance in Bristol came to an end in 1965 when the newly formed Mammal Section of the BNS opted to participate in the Mammal Society of the British Isles' national distribution scheme (NDS).⁴⁸ This scheme sought to create a national map of mammalian distribution. To contribute, the BNS therefore produced and published an annual 'mammal survey', within which was a subsection on *Vulpes vulpes*.⁴⁹ By providing an annual account of foxes in and around Bristol, these reports supply an insight into not only the presence and behaviour of urban foxes, but how they were perceived by those contributing to the reports and Bristolians at large. Published annually from 1967 to 1980, they form the evidential basis of this chapter, and hence its methodology centres around systematic analysis of their content. These reports show that from the 1965 commencement of the reports, latent opinions towards urban foxes that had festered under the surface of Bristol's consciousness began to bubble, growing in vigour as the period progressed. This chapter is one of transition and divergence as the impact of historically situated cultural changes, individual perceptions, and the actions of foxes as autonomous actors themselves became apparent and the unquestioned hegemony of the human-nature divide in the city showed signs of faltering.

When the first surveys were published from 1965 to 1967, because the primary purpose of these surveys was the collection of distributional data to be plotted on a national map for the NDS, the information they conveyed was nearly wholly numerical.⁵⁰ However, as the surveys went on, they became incrementally more qualitative. From 1969, the reports gave each species its own subsection containing anecdotes such as foxes 'seen feeding from a waste bin' and living in the grounds of a University of Bristol hall of residence.⁵¹ In 1972, this escalated as new recording

⁴⁸ Barbara E. Jones, 'Distribution of Mammals in the Bristol Area 1965-66', *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 31, 3 (1967), p. 285.

⁴⁹ G. B. Corbet, 'Provisional Distribution Maps of British Mammals', *Mammal Review*, 1, 4/5 (1971), p. 95.

⁵⁰ Jones, 'Distribution of Mammals in the Bristol Area 1965-66' (1967), pp. 285-290; Roger G. Symes, 'Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1967', *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 31, 4 (1968), pp. 403-406.

⁵¹ Roger G. Symes, 'Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1969', *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 32, 6, (1970), pg. 612; Roger G. Symes, 'Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1971', *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 32, 2 (1972), pp. 143-144; Roger G. Symes, 'Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1970', *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 32, 1 (1971), p. 50.

cards were introduced ‘to meet the needs of those wishing to be more involved in the study of mammals than merely noting grid references’.⁵² These changes, which may at first appear insignificant, reveal an important shift in the mammal survey's aims. Initially, their contribution to the NDS was the main factor justifying their inclusion in the annual *Proceedings of the BNS*. However, by including information which was not of use to the NDS, the reports increasingly appealed to the wider purposes of the *Proceedings*. In 1986, the BNS was established to investigate ‘every branch of science that finds culture amongst [its membership]’.⁵³ Its purpose, therefore, was the acquisition and dissemination of scientific knowledge and the enjoyment of its membership through this. Hence, any information included in the mammal surveys which did not contribute to the NDS must have been considered as contributing to knowledge and/or the enjoyment of BNS members. This shift of purpose was made complete when, in 1975, the BNS announced that despite the completion of the ‘primary objective’ of the surveys (the NDS) the annual reports would continue.⁵⁴

When looking at the surveys, the prominent position of the urban fox is evident. Each year, the *Vulpes vulpes* subsection stands out for its length, detail, and its anecdotal inclusions, the vast majority of which were from urban settings. From 1967, just two years after the project began, the mammal society commenced an annual ‘fox rally’ for members to coordinate vulpine observation.⁵⁵ Therefore, while the purpose of the surveys was not initially to record and report the lives of urban foxes, this quickly emerged as central to them. When the NDS provided Bristol’s naturalists with a chance to turn their attention to foxes, a latent fascination with the creatures was given a route to surface. The inclusion of vulpine behaviour extraneous to the NDS therefore demonstrates that the observation and publication of their behaviour was viewed by the society as fulfilling the twin purposes of acquisition and dissemination of knowledge and the facilitation of its membership’s enjoyment. Prior to this period, knowledge of urban foxes was not considered worthy of obtaining, as evidenced by the lack of any documentation. The mammal surveys and

⁵² Roger G. Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1972’, *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 32, 3 (1973), p. 257.

⁵³ F. Coles Phillips, ‘The First Hundred Years: A Centenary History of the Bristol Naturalists Society 1862-1962’, *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 30, 3a (1962), p. 183.

⁵⁴ Roger G. Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1975’, *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 35, 1 (1976), p. 25

⁵⁵ A.R. Holeton, ‘Report of the Mammal Section’, *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 31, 4 (1968), p. 348.

their shift to include vulpine detail therefore demonstrates a shift in values, a change in how urban foxes were seen. Value was now found in their observation and its publication, a far cry from the silence of the prior period. This shift indicated that perceptions of urban nature were changing as Bristolians acknowledged the presence of the fox and were forced to confront this reality that so starkly diverged with the expectations set by the human-nature binary. The hegemony of the nature-culture dichotomy in urban space was fractured as the city confronted a creature so blatantly defying its expectations.

One reason for this change results from the characteristics and behaviour of the urban fox itself. In 1976, one fifth of all reports to the mammal section were of foxes, the vast majority of which came from urban settings. This was, in the words of the author, A. F. Jayne, ‘an indication of the continuing increase of this adaptable animal within the city limits’.⁵⁶ Research suggests that this is likely to be true, as fox populations in urban areas were on the rise during this period and did not stabilise until 1980.⁵⁷ The rising interest in these creatures as evidenced by the mammal surveys and the vulpine observation it recorded was therefore likely to be due, in part, to their multiplication and increased visibility. However, across the period with which this dissertation is concerned, interest in and numbers of foxes did not directly correlate. As has been noted, 1965 was the first point at which the urban fox in Bristol received attention and systematic documentation. However, by this point foxes already permeated the entire city.⁵⁸ By 1968, when the project had only run for three years, over fifty percent of fox sightings already came from within the city of Bristol.⁵⁹ It was not, therefore, simply their prevalence which created interest in the species and shaped the influence of cultural conceptions.

Many of the details provided for urban foxes centre around amusing anecdotes of vulpine happenings within the city. Instances include a pair disrupted while mating that managed to ‘jump over a wall whilst still “knotted”’, of a fox seen carrying a string of sausages and ‘a fox living in

⁵⁶ Jayne, ‘The Avon Mammal Report, 1976’, p. 79.

⁵⁷ Harris, Woollard, ‘Bristol’s Foxes’, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Roger G. Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1969’, *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 31, 5 (1969), p. 531; Roger G. Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1969’, *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 32, 6 (1970), p. 612.

Eastville stadium [which] disrupted greyhound racing several times.’⁶⁰ It is hard to imagine that these deeply entertaining tales would be told about a less easily personable species featured in the mammal reports such as the common long eared bat, for instance. As Andrew Flack explains, humans have a far greater inclination towards interest in those animals we relate to and can understand.⁶¹ Foxes are charismatic creatures, mid-sized carnivores of the same family as our beloved pet dogs. When the mammal reports provided a reason for Bristolians to turn their eyes towards the fox, the fox ensnared their attention by simply existing in the urban. The characteristics and behaviours of foxes themselves were therefore, in part, responsible for the attention they garnered and how these impacted human conceptions of them. As established above, the change seen in the mammal surveys indicated a weakening in the human-nature dichotomy and its manifestation in conceptions of the city. Foxes themselves in their material and cultural reality contributed to the fracturing of the cultural conception that saw their presence ignored and explained away. Therefore, the role of foxes themselves in impacting the way cultural conceptions functioned in relation to attitudes towards them, demonstrates that the cultural frameworks of understanding that shape human attitudes are not immutable but historically situated and can shift and weaken. In this instance, alterations of the extent to which the nature-culture dichotomy was rigidly applied to the city and its nonhuman inhabitants shifted in response to the actions of those animals subject to the dichotomy and its urban manifestations.

The agency of the fox was not the only factor at this time that contributed to change and shaped perceptions of the city. In this period were the roots of the urban ecology and urban wildlife conservation movements that would come to fruition in the 1980s, as ably recounted by David Goode.⁶² In the early 1970s, landscape designers and urban planners began to highlight the possibilities of ecologically friendly cities, Richard Mabey coined the phrase ‘the unofficial countryside’ in reference to the ample wildlife of urban areas, and in 1974, the ‘Nature in Cities’ conference was held in Manchester drawing attention to the value of nature in urban planning.⁶³

⁶⁰ Roger G. Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1970’, *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 32, 1 (1971), p. 50; Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1973’ *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 33, 1 (1974), p. 67; A. F. Jayne, ‘The Avon Mammal Report, 1977’, *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 37, 1 (1978), p. 67.

⁶¹ Andrew Flack, *The Wild Within: Histories of a Landmark British Zoo* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2018), p. 121.

⁶² Goode, *Nature in Towns and Cities*, p. 289.

⁶³ Goode, *Nature in Towns and Cities* (2014), p. 289-291; Richard Mabey, *The Unofficial Countryside* (London: Collins, 1973).

While this movement had not yet ‘gone mainstream’, its roots were firmly planted by the mid-70s. That this change coincided with a shift in perspective towards the urban fox is not coincidental but is rather symptomatic of how cultural movements influence culturally held conceptions in a reciprocal process of moulding and maturing. In the 1970s, the emergence of a cultural movement emphasising the value of nature in urban spaces emerging from a historical context in which this movement found support, appears to have helped create and widen cracks in the cultural conception of the city and nature as incompatible. Culture is far from static, hence neither are those pervasive ideas disseminated through it.

While the change of the late 60s and the 70s as seen in the mammal reports surely demonstrates cracks in the nature-culture dichotomy and its urban manifestation, this does not mean that urban foxes came to be thoroughly accepted as a feature of the urban landscape and that the dichotomy was abandoned. The extent of change should not be overstated. While the enjoyment of the BNS membership through the observation of urban foxes was indicative of an attitudinal change that acknowledged and did not condemn the presence of foxes, this entertainment itself was not wholly reflective of their acceptance in urban space. An alternative explanation for the enjoyment garnered through observation of urban foxes is the comical juxtaposition of a wild animal in a non-wild setting. The absurdity of two subjects (the city and the fox) which appear incongruous is a classic comedic device as per the incongruous juxtaposition theory of humour.⁶⁴ For instance, vulpine copulation in rural areas is simply deemed natural and hence little entertainment is gained upon witnessing or recounting it. However, when ‘out of place’ in the city, this natural act gains comedic value as seen in the evident hilarity of two ‘knotted’ foxes jumping over a suburban fence.⁶⁵ Foxes are perceived as out of place as a result of the perceived incompatibility of nature and the urban as per the human-nature dichotomy. That such enjoyment was garnered through observation of urban foxes may, therefore, have resulted from a dichotomous view of nature and the urban which found absurdity at urban vulpine presence, indicating the persistence of this cultural conception even in the face of change.

Over the course of the mammal surveys, several points of conflict were raised, increasing in frequency and intensity across the period. Vulpine behaviour such as bin rifling and killing small

⁶⁴ M. P. Mulder, Anton Nijholt, *Humour Research: State of the Art* (Enschede: Centre for Telematics and Information Technology, 2002), p. 4.

⁶⁵ Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1970’, p.50.

pets, specifically, feature early in the reports.⁶⁶ These problematised actions were entirely natural, the result of foxes searching for food within their territory. However, in the context of the city, a realm conceptualised as a space of human dominion, these behaviours were unwelcomed. By interfering with human waste disposal and killing human pets — those animals that *are* permitted to co-exist in the city and in intimate proximity to humans — the fox violated expectations of the city, transgressing the sociospatial order and eliciting a response of indignation. In 1972, a Bristol community group complained that ‘the invasion of foxes was becoming serious’ and others claimed that foxes were ‘getting bolder’.⁶⁷ The choice of the term ‘invasion’ and that work of this time and even now commonly refer to fox urban migration as vulpine ‘colonisation’ implies that their presence was unwanted and unwelcomed and that the process of permeating the city was forceful, disruptive, and even violent. It suggests a city that is ‘ours’ and distinctly not ‘theirs’, a space of human dominion in which foxes are not permitted. That this ‘invasion’ was ‘becoming serious’ reveals discomfort at their presence, especially as it grows and butts up against human lives. As biologist Roberto Padovani explains, ‘boldness’ is the result of decreased wariness and neophobia which naturally results from constant stimuli exposure in the life of an urban fox. To say foxes are ‘getting bolder’ implies their behaviour is pushing beyond the expected, regardless of the explicability of this characteristic.⁶⁸ As the city is viewed as a human space, that another creature may occupy it with confidence, showing little deference to, or fear of, the human is disconcerting. Their comfortability in our presence elicits our discomfort in theirs. These points of conflict clearly result from how urban space is conceptualised and how other creatures may, or may not, exist within them as resulting from the human-nature dichotomy. The discomfort, irritation and indignation felt by Bristol’s residents at the actions of their vulpine neighbours who violate the sociospatial order of the city reveals the strength of these conceptions and the extent to which they dictate our interactions with, and reactions to, other beings.

The period of 1965 to 1980 saw a significant shift in attitudes towards urban foxes who, in the previous period, were wholly ignored but over these 15 years, became the main feature of the annual Bristol mammal survey. In this period, the observation and study of urban foxes came to

⁶⁶ Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1969’, p. 612; Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1971’, p. 143.

⁶⁷ Symes, ‘Mammal Survey Bristol District, 1972’, p. 260.

⁶⁸ Roberto Padovani, Zhuoyu Shi, Stephen Harris, ‘Are British Urban Foxes Bold? The Importance of Understanding Human-Wildlife Interactions in Urban Areas’, *Ecology and Evolution* 11, 9 (2020), p. 835.

be seen as contributing valuably to the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge and the facilitation of enjoyment as per the aims of the BNS. This change demonstrated that the cultural conception of the nature-culture divide was not immutable but shifted in response to those creatures to whom the conceptions were applied and weakened due to cultural movements. However, emergent and increasing unease and indignation at vulpine behaviour during this period revealed that the perceived unsuitability of foxes in the urban environment was certainly still intact. Hence, the extent to which foxes came to be accepted in the city of Bristol should not be overstated. While the hegemony of the nature-culture dichotomy was, for the first time, challenged, it was still pervasive and hugely influential.

Chapter 3- (In)Famous Vulpines, 1979-1990

In stark contrast to the period in which the analysis of this dissertation began, in the 1980s Bristol's foxes reached celebrity status. Whereas prior to 1965, the vulpines of the city were altogether ignored, from the end of the 70s they received unprecedented levels of attention, becoming the most studied fox population anywhere bar London and reaching a state of cultural ubiquity within the city. However, this fame was deeply contested. This chapter will demonstrate that the fame of the 1980s amplified fractures in the hegemony of the nature-culture dichotomy. The fruition of the urban ecology and urban wildlife conservation movements and the impact of individual variants are highlighted as Bristol's foxes polarised opinion.

To access this rise to fame, this chapter relies upon scientific publications and BBC documentaries to form its methodological basis. Most of the science referenced is the work of Bristol based biologist Stephen Harris. From 1967, Harris began his long-term study of the city's foxes, over the course of which he published upwards of 26 journal articles and a book on urban foxes alone, the majority of which centered on, or heavily featured, Bristol's foxes. It should be noted that Harris' ties to anti-hunting organisations has led to the questioning of his scientific objectivity. However, as the validity of his research itself has never been called into question, and as this dissertation does not rely upon minute scientific detail, his research itself can still be profitably used for historical analysis. The second evidential base of this chapter comes from BBC documentaries. In 1979, the BBC aired *Foxwatch*, a cutting-edge series using remote controlled infrared cameras to capture for the first time the lives of an urban fox family living under a house on Whiteladies Road in the heart of Bristol. A compilation of this was then aired as an episode of the popular *Wildlife on One* series later that year.⁶⁹ In 1981, another vulpine *Wildlife on One* episode titled 'Twentieth Century Fox: The Urban Fox, Villain or Victim?' was aired centering largely, though not wholly, on Bristol.⁷⁰ These documentaries make frequent reference to public opinion on urban foxes which has been difficult to otherwise access. Generalising from the narrative and examples presented in sources such as these is somewhat problematic, as they tend to present a dramatised version of events for entertainment purposes. However, as these narratives are corroborated by the mammal

⁶⁹ 'Fox Watch', *Wildlife on One*, BBC One, 1979; *Foxwatch*, BBC Two, 1979.

⁷⁰ 'Twentieth Century Fox', 1981.

surveys from the end of the previous period and by the picture presented in books and articles referencing the conflict, this does not present an insurmountable problem.⁷¹

In the final of the annual BNS mammal reports, the author confidently asserted that ‘the urban fox is no longer a phenomenon... It is, nowadays, much easier to see foxes within the city than in the surrounding countryside.’⁷² The ease with which this statement was made clearly shows the ubiquity of the urban fox in Bristol at this point, a stark contrast to the lack of attention they received prior to 1965. That *Foxwatch* (1979) was aired provides further evidence of their ubiquity and of public appetite for knowledge of the creatures. The production of the series was incredibly expensive, utilising cutting edge equipment purchased specifically for the show.⁷³ The BBC must, therefore, have been certain that there was public appetite for urban foxes. This appetite was evident from the success of the documentaries. The *Wildlife on One* episode *Fox Watch* drew a viewership of 7.5 million and received an impressive audience reaction index score of 84, significantly outperforming other comparable documentaries.⁷⁴ ‘Twentieth Century Fox’ was also incredibly successful, receiving a certificate of merit at the BAAS awards and special recognition at the 3rd International Wildlife film festival.⁷⁵ While the mammal surveys of the previous period showed that urban foxes started to draw interest from naturalists who are, by definition, interested in wildlife, the production and success of these documentaries demonstrated that urban foxes were of interest to even the general public. This new level of interest may, on the surface, suggest that Bristol’s urban foxes had come to be loved and accepted, implying a wholesale abandonment of the nature-culture dichotomy that had in the past relegated them to a position of invisibility. However, the reality of their fame was far more complex and contested.

That urban foxes came to hold scientific interest by the 1980s was indicative of a true shift. As previously discussed, that the scientific community had largely ignored urban foxes and, indeed, most urban wildlife in general, was symptomatic of the nature-culture dichotomy. The city was perceived as ecologically sterile and what nature did co-exist with humans in urban space was seen

⁷¹ Jayne, ‘The Avon Mammal Report, 1979’ *Proceedings of the Bristol Naturalists Society*, 39, 1 (1980), p. 68; Harris, Woollard, ‘Bristol’s Foxes’, pp. 11-14

⁷² Jayne, ‘The Avon Mammal Report, 1979’, p. 68.

⁷³ *Foxwatch*, 1979.

⁷⁴ Gail Davies, *Networks of Nature: Stories of Natural History Film-Making from the BBC* (London: University College London, 1998), pp. 249-250.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

as tainted, impure and improper nature, as no ‘true’ nature was deemed capable of living in such an unnatural environment. This assumption is known within the sciences as the ‘biological desert fallacy’ and for decades it contributed to the view of urban ecology as unworthy of study.⁷⁶ That by the 1980s, then, the urban fox received considerable scholarly interest from the ‘hard’ science of biology indicated a true shift in the application of the nature-culture dichotomy and a continuation of the trend observed through naturalist interest in the previous period. That biologists saw value in studying Bristol’s urban foxes demonstrates a significant change in conceptions of urban wildlife and a weakening of the grip of the human-nature binary on the sciences. This was certainly not, however, a complete abandonment of this belief. Indeed, the ecological desert fallacy is still perpetuated within scientific literature to this day.⁷⁷ However, the change seen in the work of Harris and others certainly indicates a weakening of its hegemony and decline of its unquestioned acceptance.

This change of value placed upon the fox in urban space was concurrent with the rise of the urban ecology and urban nature conservation movements which took root in the 70s but came to fruition and ‘went mainstream’ in the 80s. In 1987, the year after Harris commenced his study of Bristol’s foxes and one year before the airing of *Foxwatch*, Bunny Teagle published his hugely influential *The Endless Village*.⁷⁸ This book, a rich and compelling account of the ecology of Birmingham and the Black Country, is widely considered to be the start of the movement for urban ecology and conservation, destroying the myth of urban areas as ecologically sterile.⁷⁹ In 1980, the Avon Wildlife Trust — along with a couple of others and dozens more in the following years — was founded, covering a largely urban region.⁸⁰ These organisations and the movement they typified championed the value of urban wildlife, emphasising its richness, pervasiveness and its value to urban areas. The urban ecology and urban wildlife conservation movements epitomised the declining dominance of the human-nature binary and its manifestation in conceptions of urban areas. It centered around the compatibility of nature and the urban environment, challenging cultural conception which positioned humans and nature in opposition to each other. Our self-

⁷⁶ Erica Spotswood et al. ‘The Biological Deserts Fallacy: Cities in Their Landscapes Contribute More than We Think to Regional Biodiversity’, *BioScience*, 71, 2 (2021), pp.148–160.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ W.G. Teagle, *The Endless Village: The Wildlife of Birmingham, Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton* (Shrewsbury: Nature Conservancy Council, 1978).

⁷⁹ Goode, *Nature in Towns and Cities*, p. 294.

⁸⁰ Goode, *Nature in Towns and Cities*, p. 302.

made habitat, the urban, was not perceived by them as the antithesis to nature. The dissemination of this perspective into the sciences and public opinion at large fundamentally impacted the way Bristol's scientists and residents thought of their vulpine neighbours. The impact and rise of the urban ecology movements clearly demonstrated the malleability of cultural conceptions and their potential to shift in response to factors such as cultural movements.

The rise to fame of Bristol's foxes was not, however, a simple tale of increasing acceptance and the decline of the human-nature binary within cities. As the title of 'Twentieth Century Fox: The Urban Fox, Villain or Victim' suggests, the documentary heavily centers the prevalence of conflict between human and vulpine urbanites. David Attenborough's authoritative tone explains that the reaction of many 'town-dwellers towards foxes' is 'fear, antagonism, even hatred'.⁸¹ Points of conflict raised range from families awoken by screams in the night, reports of bin-raiding and the killing of household pets. Official figures representing the opinions of Bristol towards its urban foxes do not exist. However, a survey of Oxford revealed that 61% of residents believed that urban foxes needed to be controlled.⁸² Though the generalisability of this figure to Bristol is unknown, the extent to which interspecies conflict features in 'Twentieth Century Fox' indicates that many Bristolian residents were less than happy about their vulpine neighbours. Studies examining the extent of disruption actually caused by urban foxes have, however, consistently found that the nuisance they cause is minimal.⁸³ Studies in Bristol found that less than 20% of households had ever experienced bin-rifling (possibly even this is an over-estimation, given that foxes are often blamed when creatures such as cats rifle through bins) and that only 2.7% of cat owning residents had ever experienced a loss due to vulpine predation.⁸⁴ The perceived extent of nuisance is hence much larger than the actual amount of disruption caused by foxes. As Macdonald explains, 'most urban fox "problems" are more imaginary than real'.⁸⁵ That the extent of perceived conflict so outweighs the reality of the problems demonstrates the discomfort, even anger, felt by Bristol's residents at having to share 'their' urban space. These feelings result from the belief that the city is a space of human dominion. The unpermitted presence of other animals such as the fox pushed the boundaries of the sociospatial order, challenging the privileged and thoroughly naturalised

⁸¹ 'Twentieth Century Fox', 1981.

⁸² David Macdonald, *Running With the Fox* (Oxford: Facts On File Publications, 1987), p. 181.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Harris, *Urban Foxes*, p. 72; Harris, Woollard, 'Bristol's Foxes', pp. 11-13.

⁸⁵ Macdonald, *Running With the Fox*, p. 181.

position of the human as the unquestioned head of the urban hierarchy. The dominance of conflict in the narratives of Bristol's foxes in the 1980s demonstrates that, though fractured, the human-nature binary was still prevalent, shaping perspectives on urban space.

One factor of considerable importance when examining historical public attitudes which often falls by the wayside is the impact of individual differences. As Lucy Jones explains in her popular history *Foxes Unearthed*, individual opinions towards the fox can vary wildly from adoration to detestation.⁸⁶ These differences may result from a multitude of factors such as upbringing, life experience and personal beliefs.⁸⁷ For instance, studies have found that the extent of childhood interaction with wildlife has a significant impact in determining urbanites attitudes towards urban creatures.⁸⁸ The extent to which people subscribe to and apply the culturally transmitted human-nature binary, and hence how this influences their opinions towards creatures such as the urban fox, is likewise incredibly individual. Taking as a specific example the feeding of urban foxes, the huge variance of opinion in the 80s is evident. In 'Twentieth Century Fox', Attenborough explains that 'some disagree with feeding them as it encourages animals who shouldn't live in our towns,' an opinion clearly emanating from the nature-culture dichotomy.⁸⁹ Some who fed Bristol's foxes, Attenborough claims, did so from the misguided belief that they are 'half-starved and disease ridden'.⁹⁰ This view is entirely misfounded as urban foxes are no less healthy than their countryside counterparts and do not struggle to find food.⁹¹ As this perspective is not rooted in reality, it is therefore likely the result of the cultural conception of urban nature as degraded. Others, meanwhile, fed foxes because they considered it a privilege to be able to see a wild creature up close in a way that would be unfeasible in the country, finding joy in observing them. This perspective does not assume that the fox is unsuited to urban life, nor does it reject the right of the fox to exist in the city. This view hence demonstrates a casting aside of the nature-culture dichotomy. Through this single issue, it is possible to see the extent of individuality in approaches

⁸⁶ Jones, *Foxes Unearthed*, p. 1.

⁸⁷ Gad Perry et. al., "'Good" and "Bad" Urban Wildlife' from *Problematic Wildlife II*, ed. By F. M. Angelici, L. Rossil, p. 161.

⁸⁸ Hosaka T, Sugimoto K, Numata S, 'Effects of Childhood Experience with Nature on Tolerance of Urban Residents Toward Hornets and Wild Boars in Japan', *PLoS One* 12,4 (2017) p. 1.

⁸⁹ 'Twentieth Century Fox', 1981.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Harris, *Urban Foxes*, p. 68

to the urban fox in Bristol in the 1980s and how individuals subscribed, or did not, to the culturally transmitted idea that the city was not the correct habitat for the fox.

From the closing years of the 1970s, Bristol's urban foxes reached new heights of popular and scientific interest. Spurred on by the rise of the urban ecology and urban wildlife conservation movements, the grip of the human-nature dichotomy and its manifestation in cities loosened, as evidenced by the divergence of attitudes to the urban fox in Bristol. However, this shift was not universal and, to some, their fame was more accurately categorised as infamy as conflict plagued the narrative of nationally broadcast documentaries. Opinions towards the urban fox are shaped by cultural conceptions which do not exist immutably in a historical vacuum. These concepts are changeable, evolving in response to cultural shifts and finding different levels of affinity with different individuals. The fame of Bristol's urban foxes in the 1980s threw this variation into stark relief as tensions resulting from vulpine violation of the sociospatial order allowed differences in reaction to be seen, varying from adoration and misguided paternalism to hatred.

Conclusions

In 2020 as the nation plunged into lockdown, the pace of British cities was forced to slow, and the once vibrant Bristolian cityscape assumed an unfamiliar state of quiet. Locked inside their houses, staring out onto quiet streets, many Bristolian residents found themselves entranced in observation of urban foxes taking full advantage of the unfamiliarly empty streets. Lockdown brought a new wave of interest in the urban fox and many busy urbanites, usually too occupied to take stock of the nature around them, found peace and entertainment in their vulpine neighbours. In England, the latest figures reveal that 82.9% of the nation's human population reside in urban areas.⁹² With an ever-increasing wealth of scientific research emphasising the significant ecological, mental and physical benefits of the presence of wildlife in urban space, there is considerable impetus to make our cities more habitable to potential animal residents. As this dissertation has shown, however, urban cohabitation can be fraught.

This dissertation has laid out the historical process of vulpine inhabitation of the British city of Bristol, demonstrating the discordance between the reality of vulpine happenings and human perceptions. It has charted the course of urban fox migration, proliferation and rise to fame within the city and how, in each period, the culturally pervasive human-nature binary fundamentally shaped human perspectives of urban foxes. From the start, the tale of vulpine presence in the city of Bristol was one of reciprocity, agency and exclusion as the city expanded and enveloped fox habitat. The history of Bristol's foxes is one of polarity, divergence and contested meaning in which tension from the challenging of the sociospatial order brought conceptions of urban space into the spotlight. In the final seconds of 'Twentieth Century Fox,' David Attenborough's comforting tone calmly explains that 'love him or hate him, one thing seems quite certain: the urban fox is here to stay.'⁹³ As I sat in the basement of the British Film Institute thirty years after the airing of these words, I found myself struck by just how true they still were.

⁹² Government Office for Science, *Trend Deck 2021: Urbanisation* (28 June 2021) [online] <[https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation#:~:text=In%202019%2C%2056.3%20million%20people,in%20rural%20areas%20\(17.1%25\)>](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation/trend-deck-2021-urbanisation#:~:text=In%202019%2C%2056.3%20million%20people,in%20rural%20areas%20(17.1%25)>) [accessed 13 January 2022].

⁹³ *Twentieth Century Fox, 1981.*

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