

**Despite the threat our urban lifestyle poses to wildlife, many creatures still manage to flourish.**

**Kay Parris reports on London's shy fellow inhabitants**

# City Critters

**W**alking round the Docklands at night, a mile or so from London Bridge, the sight of a lone man sitting in his car facing a piece of wasteland might quicken your pace. You might have seen him last night, and the night before. In fact he's only missed five nights at his post in 1994.

On the route past Tesco's towards a layby rendezvous with Graham Aston, we unwittingly pass 16 fox earths in the road-side shrubbery. Around 7,500 foxes scavenge an existence in London, less worried by hunters and food scarcity than their country cousins.

Wildlife is an intrinsic part of city life, despite the endemic dangers of urban existence. Many of the animals are helped to survive by committed groups or individuals for whom protection and observation of a particular species has become an overriding obsession.

Graham, 32, exemplifies the lengths to which devotees will go. He opens the boot of his car and ponders the array of industrial-sized tins of dog food. Since an accident stacking shelves four years ago he's been living off Disability Living Allowance and waiting for his compensation cheque to come through. He spends around £70 a week on food for foxes and operates a much-publicised Fox Rescue Service (unpaid) with the help of his Mercury-sponsored paging device and mobile phone.

Answering around 40 calls a week from all over London, his time is spent tending orphaned baby foxes, trapping the more hostile, injured and mangy adults in cages and driving around with them "screaming and crapping" on his back seat. "OK so foxes stink," he answers anyone who turns up their nose at his fixation. "All animals stink. But foxes are grossly misunderstood. They're lovely creatures. And if you raise just one of them and release it, and it survives, the sense of achievement is incredible."

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fade when suddenly Maxine steps out of the shadows of a side street, trots deliberately along the pavement in front of us, up onto the bank and into the beam of the car's headlights.

She stands there, brownish and beautiful, staring full at us, apparently without fear. Graham weaned her as an orphaned cub, then rehabilitated her himself. He's logged in her memory as someone to be trusted, relatively.

A succession of foxes follow, all notably more nervous than Maxine. Cars come and go, their drivers unaware of the activity outside their windows. It might be nothing dramatic but we're transfixed by the honour of watching

Like the foxes we're waiting to see, Graham operates as a loner but likes to have his own kind close by (I could mention that he's also slim with light-brown hair and whiskers). His friendships extend to phone calls, early evening drinks and encounters with the other night folk. He picks up newspapers hot off the presses, drops some into the local police station and has a fag with the Securicor night watch staff who keep him tuned in to any foxy gossip.

We've been sitting in his car for an hour now. It's 11pm and my expectations are starting to

foxes use a bit of London, as if on a time-share arrangement with the humans.

The Docklands development is closing in around them, but so long as there is a patch of earth to camp in they will stick around. Increasingly driven out of the countryside by agricultural poisons they are one species that's positively thriving in London. Yet small, furtive and foraging singly, their vulnerability is tangible. Road accidents limit the life of the urban fox to an average of two and a half years. And even away from the rural hunt, there are

city psychos wandering the dark streets in search of a kill. Graham caught one once: "A complete arsehole with a bulldog who goes out chasing foxes on Surrey Quays." He called the police and the man got a warning.

Another time he saw "a group of lads kicking around a football that sprouted legs. Now I'm registered disabled, but one of them sort of fell into the dock, another into a tree and the last one head-butted my car door."

Animals have to contend with all manner of danger in the city, including violent attacks. A little further out of London in Egham, Surrey, the Swan Sanctuary encapsulates the ideal of a hospital and rehabilitation centre, custom-made for victims of human abuse. Stepping through the gate is like stepping into a small Utopia. Its founder Dot Beeson sold her home and everything she had to raise the thousands of pounds needed to get the sanctuary off the ground. Blonde, fortysomething, with soft, rather



wake," Dot mutters as she shows me pen after pen of injured swans, some almost ready for rehabilitation in the wild. She lives at and for the Sanctuary, constantly striving to generate funds. She can't remember her last holiday or her last meaningful stretch of free time.

Every pen tells a tragic story. In many cases whole families have been sick or injured. Two hours after a family of four were brought in, the cob (male) dropped dead, the female showed led poisoning,

sad, brown eyes and a heart that seems too big for her to carry, she shakes her head quietly at the "filthy world" that abuses her beloved swans or any other creature, even human. Swans are referred to the sanctuary from all over the country, often rescued by Dot's own ambulance team. From a population of 26,000 in England and Wales, around 3,000 swans a year visit the sanctuary, many from London. We walk into the operating theatre just in time to see the vet hold up a cloth bundle and murmur, "We've lost her". The team has been operating to remove a fish hook that had ruptured the swan's oesophagus. When the vet opened her up she found that the surrounding tissue was dead. So the swan, rushed in at 10pm last night, must have been living in agony with that fish hook in its neck for quite some time.

"It amazes me that fishing is not classed as a blood sport, from the carnage it leaves in its

one of the cygnets' X-rays revealed a hook in its oesophagus, another had "bits and pieces" in its gizzard and the last had a wing injury. A father of three arrived with mate and cygnets from South Park, London. He had been attacked by a group of lads with a scaffold pole. His wing was beaten to a pulp, with so many bones broken that it had to be amputated.

Once swans get out of intensive care they begin rehabilitation in one of the pond enclosures. Where possible they have been brought in with their families. They grow so close to their mates that separation often proves too much to bear. They may shun food, turn away from any contact and wait determinedly for death. Where there is no mate, Dot releases the recovering bird into a large on-site pool for it to find one. Swans who have lost a wing choose a companion among similarly afflicted comrades



## West London Mission Care in the Community somebody has to!

Published Government figures published in 1988 stated that almost 50 per cent of homeless people suffer from some kind of mental illness. For the most seriously mentally ill there would seem to be little alternative, except admission to hospital and access to the acute facilities required. If a person is not ill enough to be admitted to or remain in hospital, they are released back on to the streets, where the cycle of being picked up by the police, taken to hospital, and released, all too often begins again.

**The West London Mission is trying its best to respond to the increased numbers of mentally ill and ex-psychiatric patients that we see on an ever increasing basis, for whom care in the community is virtually non-existent. The West London Mission is trying to alleviate this problem through its eight centres. We can only do this with the continued support of the general public.**

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before being sent off to a private pool where they can live out their days in comfort.

The Swan Sanctuary began its evolution many years ago in Dot's back garden when, as a keen bird watcher, she began to notice large numbers of wounded swans and found it difficult to contact suitable vets. She began taking them to the safety of her home while looking for treatment and soon found that she was turning over some 400 a year.

"There's just something special about swans," Dot ponders softly. "They're so dignified, even dying. A tiny little baby when it dies might have appalling injuries and tears in its eyes, but it will stretch up as though there was something up there."

Looking down from the sky for a place to settle, swans are not put off by city crowds and, unlike most wild creatures, they are happy to live visibly among humans. This makes them a prime focus for urban dwellers yearning for a glimpse of wildlife. It also makes them prime targets for human abuse, meted out through fishing tackle, pylons, lead pellets, rubbish, pollution, air guns and sometimes grotesque cruelty.

Some creatures have more natural defences against man-made hazards. Bats, for example, are so unobtrusive, that you would never know if you had 24 of them in your roof. And before you rush up to check your attic wielding a crucifix, beware the Wildlife and Countryside Act of 1981 which charges up to £2,000 per disturbed bat.

Bear in mind also, that the hoards of Londoners who roam their local woodlands late into the night, bat detectors clicking as they rush into the darkness for a fleeting glimpse of a bat, would love to be in your shoes. The detection machine, splurging out code, marks out a dedicated bat group and simultaneously underlines the cosmic separation between observer and observed. It's one thing interpreting a whinny or a howl, but bats utter no noise at all. They merely send out echo-location vibrations on frequencies too high for us to register, and live life high above our heads, often napping upside down from some lofty ledge.

Most of us have never seen a bat in London but as is the case with so much of the other urban wildlife, there are thousands of them around. Clive Herbert, conservation officer for London Bat Groups, reckons it's the challenge of studying such a difficult species that gets him, alongside their uniqueness as flying mammals. But some members of the party on tonight's expedition to Queen's Wood, Highgate, are vexed at being asked to examine their motives for coming. "It's because the bats don't care whether we're here or not," declares one nervous young man intriguingly. Judging by his subsequent chat-up rate among the women in the group I infer that the feeling's mutual, and

that a more honest response would be: "It's a chance to chat up women outside the stresses of a bar environment".

Bats would die of cold in hibernation if they didn't stick together. They roost in groups of 24 or so, but urban numbers are steadily declining as tree-preferring species are being destroyed by the coppicing policies of most boroughs. Feeding areas are dwindling as ponds are filled in, grasslands ploughed up or mowed in football terrace, rather than meadow style, hence destroying the habitats of swathes of insects which are bat fodder.

Many wild species in and around London suffer as a side effect of urban development. But others sustain appalling, deliberate abuse. Nationally around 10,000 badgers per year die a

dug, from changes in the lie of the soil and the arrangement of stray badger hairs.

He resembles the late John Smith and exudes, like the former Labour leader and the badgers he loves, an impression of familial loyalty, stability and gentle humour. Sticking in family groups of up to 10, badgers will live in the same sett for many years and (despite the great strength which makes them, baiters reckon, an exciting match for their terriers) are happier to chew on passing earthworms than to be more obvious aggressors in a violent kill for food. They keep close relationships, nibbling each other's fur and playing, young and old together.

They are happy to let out spare housing space to other homeless creatures. Foxes will take up residence in disused ends of a sett, and they're

not the only opportunists around. "You even see rats coming out of the setts," explains John, who is a housing officer himself and recently took part in a campaign to build local homeless hostels.

In the gathering gloom of the wood, which I can't locate lest baiters are reading, our eyes and ears are becoming finely tuned, so that the distant laughter of young people out on the town seems a violent urban intrusion in this pocket of wilderness.

No sign of the badgers. John has been watching for 15 years since a public meeting about baiting set him on his crusade. The animals trust him but are nervous of unfamiliar humans, streetwise as they have become. You won't find badgers in the centre of London as they need extensive grasslands for their setts. But as suburban models, they have made determined inroads into local gardens and streets, scavenging efficiently when earthworms are scarce.

In the evening stillness we wait long and peacefully until boldly and noisily, two stripy heads come into view, followed by those large, grey trunks and short, stocky legs. Slowly, following our trail of peanuts towards John's outstretched hand, they munch with immense noise, then stop to sniff the strange humans with huge great snorts. One of them chances us, opting to avoid eye contact with this group of weirdos entirely and concentrate instead on the food. The hand which could be wielding a spade, gun, or blood-crazed dog is offering love and peanuts to a rarely seen, large wild creature in London, and the offer is gratefully accepted. ♦



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hideous, drawn-out death at the hands of baiters, or "diggers". Badgers who visit or settle harmlessly in people's gardens can be butchered as vermin by the householders. Three years ago London-based badger protection activist John Taylor compiled a comprehensive report on baiting which was integral in ushering in the Badger Protection Act of 1992. The Act makes badger "digging" a criminal offence and prevents land-development projects from disturbing badger setts, with penalties rising to £3,000 fines and six-month prison sentences.

But it has so far failed to create a deterrent. John explains wearily that "they get excited enough about putting down a dog to get a badger, but knowing it's illegal adds to the thrill – they don't care a damn."

An acknowledged expert, John has given court evidence against badger baiters many times even though he has never caught them red-handed. Passers-by noticing something untoward call his local group or the police, who contact John. He can tell when a sett has been

- **Swan Sanctuary, Egham, tel: (0784) 431667.**
- **London Wildlife Trust Hotline, tel: 071-278 6612.**
- **Graham Aston Fox Rescue Service, tel: 081-528 9001. Ask for pager number 822690.**
- **National Federation of Badger Groups, tel: 071-498 3220.**