



# **Foxes Unearthed: A Story of Love and Loathing in Modern Britain**

*Lucy Jones*

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As one of the largest predators left in Britain, the fox is captivating: a comfortably familiar figure in our country landscapes; an intriguing flash of bright-eyed wildness in our towns.

Yet no other animal attracts such controversy, has provoked more column inches or been so ambiguously woven into our culture over centuries, perceived variously as a beautiful animal, a cunning rogue, a vicious pest and a worthy foe. As well as being the most ubiquitous of wild animals, it is also the least understood.

In *Foxes Unearthed* Lucy Jones investigates the truth about foxes in a media landscape that often carries complex agendas. Delving into fact, fiction, folklore and her own family history, Lucy travels the length of Britain to find out first-hand why these animals incite such passionate emotions, revealing our rich and complex relationship with one of our most loved – and most vilified – wild animals. This compelling narrative adds much-needed depth to the debate on foxes, asking what our attitudes towards the red fox say about us – and, ultimately, about our relationship with the natural world.

## **Foxes Unearthed: A Story of Love and Loathing in Modern Britain Details**

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**Lucy Jones**

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## From Reader Review Foxes Unearthed: A Story of Love and Loathing in Modern Britain for online ebook

### Saturday's Child says

Thanks to a terrific review from a Goodreads friend Clare my attention was drawn to this book, and being “Team Fox” I just had to read it. Foxes are one of my favourite animals, however as an introduced species that threaten our native wildlife, farm animals and suburban backyard pets such as rabbits and chickens they are not so popular. I love seeing them but almost all of the ones I have seen have been in suburbia. I was that commuter on my way home from work one afternoon who was surprised and delighted to spy a fox sitting beside the train line train spotting in broad daylight. I found this book to be a brilliant read as it gave me an entertaining background into foxes and their history. It also provided me with an insight into the way they are viewed and treated in Britain the country that they are native to.

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### Stephen Flanagan says

I very nearly gave this 5 stars. A really wonderful, balanced, sometimes tragic view of people's relationship with our vulpine neighbours. As much a book about the vast spectrum of human kindness, stupidity and hatred, as it is a book about foxes, this book is if anything, honest, and is genuinely looking for truth and understanding, rather than the sensationalist views on either side of the pro fox, anti fox coin. There is of course, at least in my mind only one correct view on this subject, but understanding why somebody may have an opposing view is a more fruitful and effective use of time than blind condemnation or hatred. This book provides just that. a must read if you care about native flora and fauna.

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### Linda Hill says

<https://lindasbookbag.com/2017/04/01/...>

Foxes Unearthed explores in detail the relationships we humans have with these fascinating creatures.

Let me say at the outset that Foxes Unearthed will not appeal to all readers. I will confess that I didn't read the book all in one go, but returned to it over a couple of weeks. Those with a particular passion for or interest in foxes will, I think, devour it more rapidly. It is not a cosy celebration of the fox, but rather an erudite essay exploring our perceptions and responses so that it says as much about the human condition as it does about the fox. I thought the passage about the Alconbury incident was an apposite example and I'm not sure I always liked the truth about humanity I was forced to confront reading Foxes Unearthed; it wasn't always a comfortable experience.

The writing is intricately researched and I appreciated the notes, bibliography and index so that Foxes Unearthed felt like a perfect lesson in presenting material in an accessible form to an audience. I must also just say a word about the chapter illustrations by Tim Oakenfull. They are just stunning.

There was so much to learn about the fox, from its Latin *vulpes vulpes* through its biblical references to our modern day attitudes. I thought that Lucy Jones presented her material in a very balanced way, often providing thought-provoking examples and comments and making sure the reader has a full picture. So often, as she herself says, attitudes to foxes and their control ‘does depend on who you ask’.

I definitely preferred the passages where Lucy Jones writes more personally and lyrically than factually, but that is personal preference as I'm not a great non-fiction reader. I'm honestly not sure if I enjoyed reading Foxes Unearthed or not but it is most definitely an important book. It made me question my own thought processes, it showed me how to reconsider my own very pro-fox stance and be more authoritative in my opinions and it taught me a very great deal about life in Britain, about foxes and about humans especially. I really recommend reading Foxes Unearthed whatever your usual genre preference.

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## spockcrig says

"The fox's perceived villainy has much to do with our attitude to the earth and the way we treat it. The fox is a problem only in so far as it affects our own interests - and that problem is often exaggerated to suit other agendas. Intentions of spite and malevolence have been projected onto the fox for many years when, in fact, it is simply a wild animal, acting according to its nature."

Nail and head. Lucy Jones has succeeded in writing one of the most important books in contemporary society, on a subject very much at the heart of what she deems as 'fierce, emotional warfare'. If you're not convinced that the fox is worthy of such accolades, perhaps it would be worth asking one of the 585,000 people who have signed a petition objecting to the proposed re-legalisation of fox-hunting with hounds. The numbers speak for themselves.

Jones writes in the vein of a weathered journalist whose credentials seep into her words; every sentence, claim, and statement is well balanced, cited, and serves a purpose to her intention which presumably is to present a factual, objective study on *Vulpes vulpes* (our native red fox) and leave the reader to make up their mind on what fate should befall them. Prior to reading, it is perhaps tempting to cry 'bias' in favour of the fox on the writer's part - so it is then very surprising to learn that Jones herself is from a hunting family!

Jones examines the fox in astonishing detail through six thorough and comprehensive chapters, from the depiction of foxes in literature - Shakespeare, Chaucer, Aesop, Dahl - to the sensationalist mobbing of our urbanised encounters with them by the British media. You know the sort: 'monster fox kidnaps granny and kills twenty others' Daily Mail-type shenanigans that lack both scientific validity and, well, common sense.

She highlights many of the negative connotations that the word 'fox' and its derivatives currently and historically have had: 'cunning as a fox', 'foxy', 'outfox', 'to smell a fox', etc - all of the above portray an instinctive, wild animal as a sly, devious thief who engages in villainy and debauchery. To put it in logical light, it is absolute nonsense but sadly has endured over the years. If anything else, the fox is possibly the most anthropomorphised animal in existence.

The varying behaviours of the fox are also put under a magnifying glass with some help from fox-keepers, conservationists, even pest controllers (some that are paid to kill urban foxes) and the light that is shed on this equal parts shy and brazen animal is fascinating. For example, the main portion of a foxes diet in Spring consists of earthworms; foxes, in general, dislike the taste of lamb fat and only take lambs if there is nothing else to eat; there have been studies that suggest that foxes are able to use Earth's magnetic field to hunt; I could go on. The details 'unearthed' in the book are gratifying, surprising and really quite extraordinary.

The writing really comes to the fore however in the last third - dedicated entirely to fox-hunting as a 'traditional county sport' and that sport's antithesis: the Hunt Saboteurs Association. For the sake of objectivity, Jones attends a hunting meet - trail hunting, of course (cue the eye roll) - but also a group of hunt sabs doing what they do best (where a HSA member was casually punched in the face by a terrierman - a

common occurrence, we hear). She goes to quite literally painful lengths to explore the argument for and against from many walks of life - and it's refreshing, interesting even. But personally I could find no justification whatsoever to continue or re-legalise an activity as barbaric as fox-hunting. Foxes have no significant effect on diminishing wildlife (reduced habitats, pollution and a changing climate perhaps does) and, as for the carnage in the chicken coop - the fox is a predator, and any predator is an opportunist. It is utter folly to judge a fox as we would a human. Perhaps, and this is a shocking notion, the owners of livestock should take responsibility for that livestock. Just a thought. I truly believe in 20 years we will look back at fox-hunting as we do to bear-baiting and otter-hunting in this country. Outdated, unnecessary, a fatuous bloodsport. After all, has there ever been as regressive a social construct as 'tradition'? Lest we forget that slaves were once a tradition also. Keep the ban.

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## **Paul says**

I am not sure just how many foxes there are where I am living, but I see them darting across the roads at night, caught by the headlights of the car. There was even one brazen fox walking up the middle of the road at midnight once. These fleeting glimpses of our largest predator left in the UK are for me quite special, but for others, this animal is considered a nasty pest and is something to be vilified.

In this interesting account of our tempestuous relationship with the fox. Consider and cunning and crafty animal by most, Lucy Jones has delved into the folklore, fiction and her own family history and met with those that love and hate these intelligent creatures. This bang up to date account of foxes goes some way to demonstrating our complex relationship with the natural world too. To get a better understanding of the different perspectives, she joins a hunt and a later with the saboteurs of a following a hunt to get a better perspective as to how people feel about this animal and explores the issues that polarised people on the heated public debate on this subject.

Jones has written this book about *vulpes vulpes* with a considered and measured approach. You know whose side she is on, but she is prepared to talk about with people from each perspective and hear their views as well as taking the time to look at the evidence based on the facts and not the scaremongering from the press. Worth reading for anyone interested in the most recognisable of our wild creatures.

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## **Ashes says**

A bit disappointing. Bonus points for the author for speaking against the vilification of the fox - and I wholeheartedly agree with her - but even that message was lost in her writing.

The book was a bit all over the place. First, she wrote a quick overview of some literary foxes (which made a poor chapter), then threw in some fox facts, and then moved on to the hunting controversy, only to end with a chapter about urban foxes in London. A set of interesting topics that turned out quite flat when handled by the author.

But, you know, the cover & the design are gorgeous.

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## **Ben Goldfarb says**

Especially enjoyed the history of Britain's fox-hunting debates and Jones's trip into the field with the hunt saboteurs. I had no idea the issue was so contested; the author's treatment of it is even-handed and nuanced. I've always been a fan of foxes, and this book enhanced my appreciation!

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## Rebecca says

*Foxes Unearthed*, freelance journalist Lucy Jones's first book, won a Society of Authors' Roger Deakin Award for nature writing. If you're familiar with Patrick Barkham's *Badgerlands*, you'll recognize this as a book with a comparable breadth and a similar aim: clearing the reputation of an often unfairly reviled British mammal. Jones ranges from history to science and from mythology to children's literature in her search for the truth about foxes. Given the media's obsession with fox attacks, this is a noble and worthwhile undertaking.

The book proper opens with a visit to Roald Dahl's house, now a Buckinghamshire museum, where he wrote *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Still one of the best-known foxes in British literature, Dahl's Mr. Fox is a Robin Hood-like hero, outsmarting a trio of mean-spirited farmers to provide a feast for his family. Foxes' seemingly innate wiliness prompts ambivalent reactions, though; we admire it, but we also view it as a threat or an annoyance. As Jones puts it, the fox of fables and traditional stories is "a villain we cheer for."

Not everyone cheers, of course. Under Henry VIII, the Vermin Acts of 1532 (not repealed until the 1750s) promised a reward to anyone who killed foxes, then considered a nuisance animal. Fox hunting and the cruel sport of "tossing" have a long history that eventually came up against the movement towards animal welfare, starting with Jeremy Bentham in the 1740s and codified by the 1911 Protection of Animals Act. Meanwhile, Jones notes, children's books advocating compassion for animals, such as Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* (1877), ensured that the message made it out of the legislative chamber and into everyday life.

The second chapter is a useful survey of fox behavior. Foxes are omnivores, and in recent decades have started to move into Britain's cities, where they find plenty of food to scavenge. In rural settings, foxes are still the subject of farmers' loathing even though they rarely take lambs and actually help keep rabbit numbers in check. Still, the stereotype of foxes killing for fun instead of for hunger persists, whereas they in fact cache their surplus food. Chapter 3 asks whether fox numbers have reached pest status and considers various control strategies, from straightforward culling to the non-lethal methods supported by conservationists.

I enjoyed Jones's meetings with figures from both sides of the debate. She goes along on a fox hunt, but also meets or quotes animal rights activists, academics, and high-profile nature promoters like Chris Packham. All told, though, I felt this book could have been closer to 200 pages than 300. Most chapters are very long, and some could easily be combined and/or shortened. For instance, Chapter 1 relays the amount of information about fox hunting that most readers will be prepared to absorb, yet it's then the subject of two more chapters.

This is an important book for correcting misconceptions, but your enjoyment of it will likely be in proportion to your personal interest in the subject. In terms of fonts and cover design, though, you're unlikely to come across a more gorgeous book this year.

Originally published with images on my blog, Bookish Beck.

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## Jo Barton says

I fell in love with this book from the get go just because of its cover, not that I'm biased about orange whiskery creatures, you understand.

But putting aside the glory of its cover, this book really brings home our love and loathing of this most enigmatic of predators. For some, it's a creature of magic and mystery, whilst for others its a source of constant misery as hen coops up and down the land are targeted on an almost nightly basis. And then of course, there's the altogether more contentious issue of fox hunting which I'm not going to dwell on, except to say that the book covers this hot topic with great insight.

I loved the readability of the book, combining fact with fiction, folklore and magic with cold hard facts, but always, what shines through is the author's commitment to telling it like it is, with no superfluous waffle , not overly fanciful , just a really interesting look at the role foxes have in our rural and urban environments. The detail is good, the author's opinions are clearly expressed and throughout the book are intelligent observations from specialist contributors which help to give the book an overall balanced view.

There's something rather special about this beautiful wild creature and if you've been privileged to see one really close then you get the idea of both their vulnerability and their utter strength. Some years ago, I was lucky to be able to see foxes regularly at play in the early morning and it was perfectly magical to watch the rough and tumble of fox cubs with an early sun glinting on their russet coats, which were a darker red than I expected. But to watch this fascinating wild creature relaxed and playful, delighting in the sights and scents of an early Summer morning was just stunning and it is something that I will never forget.

I enjoy reading books which teach me something new and in Foxes Unearthed, I learned an abundance of facts about *Vulpes Vulpes* which I didn't know, and that's where the delight of this book lies, in learning something new and precious about one of our very special wild creatures.

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## Jane says

This book spun into my consciousness towards the end of last year, when I was captivated by an extract in one of those lovely anthologies from the Wildlife Trust.

*'We stared at each other, the fox and I, for a charged moment. Her eyes were a pale bronze and seemed bright and aware. She turned away and trotted down the street towards my house. She wasn't in a rush at all. We walked for a while, her in front, me a few paces behind. In those seconds I got the sense that we were one and the same, mammals, predators, denizens of the earth ...'*

I wanted to learn more, and I have learned so much from this book.

It's wonderfully readable, it holds a wealth of fascinating detail, and it is underpinned by the authors obvious love of her subject. She is fair though, giving time to all interested parties, all sides of the debate; and acknowledging that some of those who hate foxes have good reason and that some of those who love them may not be entirely clear-sighted.

She writes of riding out with huntsmen, and then seeks out evidence to evaluate their assertion that their sport is 'actually the most humane form of pest control and a more natural way for the fox to die than poisoning or shooting.' And she remembers her grandfather who rode with his local hunt, leading her to an

understanding of why fox-hunting was loved by so many, why it thrived for so many years.

Then she writes of an outing with hunt saboteurs. She examines the strength of their convictions, the lengths they will go to, their treatment by huntsmen and by the authorities, and the foundations of their beliefs.

Each account is vividly drawn. There is remarkable drama, and extraordinary and ordinary characters are given room to share their opinions and their experiences.

Other chapters consider the fox in the country and in the town.

In the country there were farmers with many different attitudes. Some hated foxes and regarded them as vermin who would take anything; but others had experiences that suggested that wasn't their case and that it was possible to live side by side with foxes.

I loved this statement:

*“Chickens aren't native to this country. We domesticated one of the most dopey animals that just sits there and lays eggs with no protection. So when a wild animal comes in it's the same as saying 'don't eat a doughnut' that is sat in front of us.”*

In the town I was interested by a pest controller who loved nature but believed that there was a need to manage numbers; and I could sympathise by those who had suffered damage, intrusion or injury, though I didn't always agree with their interpretation of what had happened.

(The fox debate in the city is very much like the seagull debate down here on the coast.)

Lucy Jones sets out the arguments, the evidence, and so many different facts and stories about foxes wonderfully well throughout.

There are foxes in literature, there are foxes embedded in language, there are foxes in folklore; and though I really loved that what I loved most of all was coming away with a much better understanding of the fox as a living creature.

There are so many wonderful stories and details that I really can't pull out just a few to share.

I will simply say that this quote expresses my feelings perfectly:

*“The fox's perceived villainy has much to do with our attitude to the earth and the way we treat it. The fox is a problem only in so far as it affects our own interests – and that problem is often exaggerated to suit other agendas. Intentions of spite and malevolence have been projected onto the fox for many years when, in fact, it is simply a wild animal, acting according to its nature.”*

And that I love foxes but I understand why other don't; and I am so pleased that I read this thought-provoking and entertaining survey of our relationship with them.

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## **Sarah says**

Us Brits have a fraught relationship with our wildlife. We complain about the (supposed) negative impact wild animals have on our lives - eating pets, killing chickens and livestock - yet also campaign to put an end to fox hunting, badger culling and the like. Around the area where I come from, badgers have been a

common sight, albeit mostly dead ones, for as long as I can remember. However I can count on just two hands the times I've seen a fox. They seem so elusive and mysterious, and it's understandable why so many of us are captivated by them.

This book focuses on folklore surrounding foxes, myths or their misrepresentation in the media (for example that their impact on livestock, household pets and even children is wildly exaggerated), their behaviour, fox hunting (both sides to the debate) and more. I read a review on Amazon complaining that this only focused on British foxes and too much on hunting - so if that's something that would put you off then bear that in mind. This is not a long book but it did take me longer than usual to get through, not because I didn't get along with the style of writing or the content, just that there is a lot of information to take in.

Well researched, impartial and fascinating. If you had any interest in the natural world then I recommend checking this one out.

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### **Clare O'Beara says**

The author had a grandfather who hunted foxes, a Scot. She thinks that his experience in WW1 was partly the reason. Men came home looking for the adrenalin and camaraderie of the war. Other people hunted just because they like horses and hounds and customs. Hunting is now illegal in Britain but drag hunts continue and sometimes they kill foxes.

We start by finding the fox in fables, folk tales, furs and rural names like Todhunter. Moving on to a night with a fox shooting professional, which can be distressing. Be prepared for a few days out with hunts, including the saboteurs' point of view. Urban foxes, rescued foxes and foxes in the media conclude the picture.

We're told more foxes are shot than ever, foxes generally do not take live lambs, and foxes may spread wildflower seeds in their scat. No mention of Monica Edwards's badger watching books in which she twice saw a boar badger kill a vixen denning near his sett. See 'The Valley And The Farm'.

The author does not use correct hunting terms so I winced every time she said 'the hounds' or 'tails' or 'bark'. I think it would not have taken long to get to know these terms and it would make the book more authentic and better researched. I also note that she does not mention that hunts often used to stop up the earth entrances overnight while the fox was out prowling, so the hunted fox could find none of his or her safe tunnels. Did nobody tell her? She several times mentions digging foxes out with terriers and other skulky practices. We are told that police used to be on the side of hunting landowners, now that has shifted somewhat. But police crushed a vehicle belonging to hare coursers and publicised it, whereas they do not seize and crush from fox hunters. Class bias? She leaves the query hanging, so presumably the police were not asked or did not reply.

Notes P255 - 274. I counted 22 names that I could be sure were female, including Mary Poppins. This is an unbiased review, and I never hunted.

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### **Jess says**

**Check out this review and more on my blog!**

What's this? A book review? That's right, friends - I've actually read something! In fact, slowly but surely,

I'm starting to read more.

As I'm taking part in Non-Fiction November this month I'm on a bit of a non-fiction kick, and I couldn't resist nabbing a copy of this new release.

If you're new to non-fiction (and considering I only really started reading it last year I'm certainly no connoisseur) then this would be a great place to start. Not only is it a fairly short book, but it's also very readable and feels as though it's been written from a place of real love; Jones isn't afraid to talk about her own experiences with foxes, from her childhood to the present day, but they're welcome additions to a book that easily could have become a book about statistics. Instead Jones is very fair; she loves foxes, but she doesn't villainise those who don't and she's not afraid to point out the flaws in those who idolise them.

Before this I hadn't read a non-fiction book about wildlife and now I'm keen to read more. If anyone has any recommendations for books on wildlife, preferably ones that include a bit of memoir or folklore or anything that doesn't make them too dry, please let me know!

One thing I must thank this book for is making me realise how much I love foxes. They really are beautiful creatures and I finished this book completely in awe of them; I'm not sure I know of any other creature that can adapt like the fox can. They're real survivors.

In fact this book taught me as much about myself as it did about foxes. Sounds cheesy, I know, but I went into this book expecting to be fascinated by the first chapter about how foxes have been represented in our stories from Aesop to Roald Dahl, which I was, and expecting to be a little bored or out of my depth with the following chapters, which I most certainly wasn't. I've come a long way considering I'd've been hugely intimidated by a book like this two or three years ago.

Not only that, but *Foxes Unearthed* helped me to see fox-hunting in a different way, too. Personally I am against fox-hunting; I think (literally) hounding a fox and then letting it be torn to pieces is cruel and completely unnecessary, and if foxes are such a threat to farming, which I really don't think they are, it should be up to farmers to both protect their own animals and deal with a fox problem in a humane way.

That being said, I'd never considered the social aspects of hunting before, or the fact that, for many, fox-hunting became something of a coping strategy after the First and Second World Wars. I'd also never considered that we may actually have fox-hunting to thank for the UK still having foxes now, as they've been kept around to hunt and therefore haven't disappeared like our wolves did. I'll never be a pro-hunting person, but I came out of this book a little less likely to think of those who are as dastardly men in red coats, twirling their mustaches.

*Foxes Unearthed* separates fact from fiction, studying the evolution of foxes in our stories and the cold hard facts, and delves into the worlds of the people who want to hunt them and the people who want to save them, both of which are worlds with pros and cons. Whether you're fascinated by foxes, wild for wildlife or completely new to the realm of non-fiction, I recommend picking up this book!

I've come away from *Foxes Unearthed* feeling like I've really learned something new, and I'll definitely be looking out for more of Jones's work in future.

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## **Maria says**

Important book about relationships between foxes and people. I'm definitely a fox lover now!

## Mark Avery says

I enjoyed reading this book (which is now out in paperback).

This book is about Foxes: hunted Foxes, urban Foxes, hen-eating Foxes, Foxes in literature and country lore. Foxes in our heads and in our hearts. It's a well-written largely affectionate but not sentimental look at Foxes from lots of angles and it's a very good read.

It reminded me of what I always thought to be a strange contrast between the conversations I would sometimes have at Game Fairs (well, I was mostly expected to listen rather than discuss) when I was told how verminous the Fox was and that they had to be killed for their own sakes, for the sake of wildlife and to protect the very fabric of rural society, and the huge numbers of prints of drawings and paintings of wily old Renard, dressed as a country gentleman which were on sale at the same event and presumably sometimes found their way into the houses of the spluttering countrymen who were telling me what was what. We should all read this book to see Foxes from different angles and to have some myths dispelled.

I rarely see Foxes – I wish I did. When I do see them it is more often walking rather confidently down a London street as I head back to my bed for the night than out in the countryside. I don't recall ever seeing a Fox in my street or even in my small rural town in over 30 years of living here.

This review first appeared on Mark Avery's blog [www.markavery.info/blog/](http://www.markavery.info/blog/) on 9 April 2017

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