



## A Guide to Poultry Predators

While Mad-Eye Moody's barking of "Constant vigilance" at our young wizard-ing heroes (sorry, big fan of Harry Potter) could be construed as verging on major paranoia, the words of the grumpy Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher can be sage advice when dealing with the issue of predators and our chickens, constant vigilance. This is a real issue that many people often avoid due to it being unsavoury, it is however not one to be frightened of, with a well prepared area for your girls and some sound advice from a wizard, predators can be outwitted.

### Foxes

Monsieur Reynard is often the first thought and worry whenever the issue of poultry predators comes up; they are indeed cunning and the primary hunter of chickens. Whether it is an urban fox or the countryside variety, neither are necessarily nocturnal, especially urban foxes that are more desensitised to humans, and always seeking an easy meal. In fact many people today purposefully feed foxes in their garden but this will not stop them taking a nice, inviting, live chicken for dinner.



Foxes will often kill your girls in one sitting with the aim of individually taking them back and forth to its den, so just because you see it running away doesn't mean it won't be back. But although it may kill all of them it can actually only eat one or two before being full and therefore won't want any more. I remember vividly as a child, a fox killed 87 out of 100 chickens my parents had and only took three – what we discovered the next morning was a massacre. Making sure that your girls are safely locked away each night in a sturdily built house is very important. However, if you are lucky enough to live on the Isle of Man there are no foxes on your island, so that's one problem solved.

- *How do I know if I have foxes around?*

There are two tell tale signs that foxes have visited your garden. The first to look for is fox faeces. A couple of inches in length, thin ribbon or tube-like in shape, and black in colour, it is fairly easy to identify. Secondly, are signs of digging, especially around your run but also around places like compost heaps where they might go digging for grubs and vermin.

- *How do foxes get at my chickens?*

Foxes are versatile, sly and crafty creatures. They will scramble over fences or walls as high as 6ft (if they can get a 'purchase' on them), or tunnel below them so they can get into your flock, although this does take longer. They can leap up to 2-3ft with a good 'run-up'. They are also armed with strong teeth and this means they can chew through weak wires, like chicken wire, and also chew or scratch at soft wood, plastic or flimsy ply board within an evening.

- *When are foxes most active?*

They are mostly about first thing in the morning and at dusk. They are also particularly active in the year between February and May when they need to collect food for their cubs and later in the year between June and August when the cubs first leave the family unit. At this time they will be brazen enough to visit during the daylight hours. Urban foxes, however, are less fearful and have slightly different routines to country foxes so can be seen at anytime of day throughout the year.

- *A fox got in and killed my chickens. How do I stop this happening again?*

Foxes are great climbers and can scale a 6ft high fence to get in to your run. They will also jump from ledges, trees or platforms to help them get in amongst your girls. The answer to this is a solidly built run with either an open mesh, or solid, roof. Our runs, for example, are made of inch by half inch 18 gauge galvanised weld mesh covered in a plastic coating. This is a strong material that will not be gnawed through, unlike a weaker chicken wire. If, however, you do not wish to roof your pen, higher smoother walls are the answer.

Electric fencing is the best answer as it is the perfect deterrent for foxes, particularly electric poultry netting. Not everyone likes to deal with electric fencing, or is able to use it in the space they have, but it is normally our first choice when advising. A sharp shock to the fox's nose as they approach the pen will soon have them heading in the opposite



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direction. We have found this, with monitoring, has kept our birds safe and sound for many years. Please note though, Electric Fencing will only give the predator a shock if they touch the live wires whilst their paws are in contact with the ground.

- *I noticed digging along the side of my pen? How can I stop Mr Fox entering this way?*

A good strong run is important to protect your flock. However, foxes are great diggers and can often scratch out a hole into your run, depending on type of soil, in an hour. If you are not able to move your run regularly then putting down a mesh No-Dig Skirt, about 10" wide, around the perimeter of your run and house will stop this problem. Laying some paving slabs that he can't move (he can move bricks) also works, or adding a strand of electric fence to zap their noses. Foxes will always dig directly up against the fence and if they encounter a problem will move up and down the run to start again. As they cannot get through the No Dig Skirt their efforts will quickly be thwarted. Whilst they have a reputation for craftiness, they will not move away from the fence to dig a longer tunnel (it would take too long) and so your chickens shall be safe from intrusion.

- *I've put human hair down and heard that human urine can deter foxes? Does this work?*

This is a much debated issue and usually anecdotal. Some think that foxes will stay away from these things, whereas others think that it will merely lead to the fox marking the territory as his own instead. It is however something that you may wish to try (*Note: we have tried it ourselves and it didn't work for us*).

### Badgers

Not often thought of as poultry predators, Badgers are omnivores and can be savage creatures. Presenting many of the same problems as foxes, although they do not clamber over fences, their digging ability is phenomenal. Taking the same approach as you would to a fox problem is best, electric fencing being your primary choice, or a No-Dig Skirt, will see badgers excluded from your pen.

### Rats and Mice

Vermin can be just as much a nuisance to birds as they can to humans, causing trouble in both urban and countryside environments. A tell tale sign of a vermin problem could be a raided feed bin or sack; or they may even make their way into your run to eat directly from your feeder and drink from the drinker. They need to be excluded not only because they will eat the feed that you have paid for but because they bring with them diseases (a chicken will eat a mouse if it were able to catch it but again this ought to be avoided from a disease point of view).



In winter, vermin can also make their way into poorly secured houses to find somewhere warm to bed down during the cold weather, or to eat and drink. For obvious reasons this is far from ideal. They can also chew through rotten wood or plastic if they desire. Don't forget, a hungry rat will attack and eat a chick or small chicken especially at night while they roost. On the adverse, mild weather can cause rodents to be more prolific and therefore a bigger problem. If your favourite feline is up to the task it can usually keep mouse and rat problems in check and their numbers low but, our advice, is to eliminate them completely with properly placed bait boxes.

- *How can I prepare my area to keep it less friendly to rodents?*

Firstly, the site of your henhouse can make a big difference but, if you are restricted with where it can be placed then other methods need to be employed. Is it placed along a hedgerow or a natural path from one part of your garden to the other? Secondly, is the area around the henhouse clear? Places like compost heaps; piles of logs and rubbish are natural nesting places for rodents and should be removed from around your hen house, or baited.

A raised, solidly built hen house will also deter rodents and stop them getting in among your birds at night. Finally, feed is the important issue. Making sure that all feed bins are secure will stop vermin from being attracted to an easy meal and you should make sure any spilled food is cleared up. Making sure the feeder is off the ground is also important, feed that gets stuck in places, e.g. between paving slabs, is inaccessible to chickens but easily reached by rodents. Don't throw too



much food on the ground for scratch feeds because if the birds do not eat it all, it will attract more vermin.

- *What sort of trap should I use to catch rats and mice?*

Traps are an up close and personal way of dealing with a rodent issue which isn't always everyone's cup of tea. There are two sorts of traps however. Impact traps kill immediately upon being sprung. Live traps catch the rodent but leaves you with the issue of what to do then? There are strict guidelines on the despatching and disposal of rodents. They can be killed with a single blow to the head or shot with an air rifle. When disposing of the rodent, it should be wrapped in a bag and properly secured. You must wear gloves to avoid such things as Weils disease.

Our advice though is to use a baited box if possible. These are lockable plastic boxes and the bait is placed in a chamber inside so the rodent needs to go into the box, eat the food and go back to its hole. Great care needs to be taken with baits and we advise either a block bait or loose bait, not bags because these can get carried out of the box by the rodent and left around for other animals (although there are non-poisonous poisons like Eradibait that will only affect rodents). The boxes should be placed along the rat-runs and you should be sure no other animals can gain access to the bait. Once back in their holes the bait will kill the rats there, which eliminates the issue of disposal. Do not allow your birds to get at a dead rodent in case it has been poisoned.

- *What are the regulations about using poisons?*

Most poisons are anti-coagulant poisons which is neither a quick nor painless death for rodents, causing them to bleed to death or dehydrate. By law the poison should be put into some form of sealed, and most importantly, lockable bait box to stop other animals getting into it. Mice will also eat rat poison; it however works far quicker in them and can lead to them dying exposed in your garden as opposed to in their nests, which can mean they might be eaten by something else in turn so if found they need burying or disposing of by burning.

## Mink, Stoats and Weasels

Little thought of as predators of poultry, these creatures can however be ruthless, often killing a bird and taking it straight away. A high metabolism means that these are aggressive little animals and are almost constantly hunting. Weasels and Stoats can present many problems as they are able to go through small gaps and are good climbers as well. Mink have made their way into the eco-system relatively recently after being released by activists from farms. As their numbers grow they are becoming more and more of an issue for chicken keepers. They will often nest in places like tree stumps, old burrows or taking over rat nests after killing the inhabitants. Clearing any of these potential problems will help.

Mink are the largest of the three, often being mistaken for otters, but they are ruthless killers. Their eradication from an area is a problem that needs to be dealt with by specialists. Stoats are smaller than mink, but larger than a weasel; they do however have longer tails but again will attack and take a small bird. Weasels are very similar in 'diameter' to mice but longer and, as such, can gain access through the smallest of gaps. Weasels are lightning-quick and will kill and take small birds.

- *How do I stop them from getting into my hens?*

Notoriously difficult to stop, it is young birds which are particularly vulnerable to these little hunters. Even electric fencing is not effective here. Beyond having a good solid house and run, there are a few extras that you can add to discourage them. Whilst good climbers, smooth surfaces will help to stop them and covering ventilation holes with mesh also helps. They will also quickly exploit any rat or mole holes around your hens as a way of getting in, filling these in will block off this option for them. Making sure your mesh is no larger than half inch by one inch also helps.

- *Is there a live trap for stopping them?*

Fen traps are recommended for catching stoats, mink or weasels. Care must always be taken when setting them up as they can be dangerous. Once a mink has been caught it is illegal to release it back into the wild. The best answer is to phone your local authority.





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## Magpies and Crows

Not often thought of in the same breath as predators of chickens, anyone who had ever has a crow or magpie problem will know the trouble they can cause. They will eat a huge amount of chicken food and, as with all vermin, can carry disease. These winged opportunists can get into your girls feed for an easy meal; they can steal eggs and also go as far as taking chicks (one of the many reasons why chicks should always be kept in a covered run).

Often cautious of humans they can still be a persistent pest. If you do not wish to simply shoot them to get rid of the problem there are humane alternatives. Hanging a dead bird will also keep others away. A pink balloon in your run sometimes works as it is associated with a face and causes them to keep their distance or a scarecrow (moved regularly) does help. Setting up polypropylene tape can also work, it hums in the wind and causes the birds to stay away, they can however quickly become used to the noise, sometimes in a matter of days.

Hanging old CD's will also deter them, similar to "Owl Eyes" placards; these can affect your chickens for a time too and result in a halt to laying. A popular alternative is the Larsen trap. They work by having a live crow in one side, which you entice in with offal or eggs. A crow will not tolerate another crow in the same territory and so while trying to engage each other the second bird also becomes trapped. The captured bird can then be released somewhere else or despatched quickly with an air rifle.



## Birds of Prey

As you'd expect from a bird with the title Bird of Prey, chicks are a source of food for them. They are normally only found in open field areas where they can visually target their prey and then swoop in to take the birds. An enclosed run is the best and one of the only forms of protection against this problem. Although they will take chicks it is unlikely they will tackle an adult bird.

## Cats (Big & Small)

The domestic cat can take a liking to small chicks as they would be seen no differently than small garden birds to a cat. Again a covered run is always best for chicks. Lions, Panthers and Tigers however, are not normally a problem in this country, unless you live around Bodmin Moor!!

By identifying the predator problems in your area and being ready for them you can make sure that your girls are safe and protected and you can rest easy.