



**GCSE**

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**ENGLISH/ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
HIGHER TIER  
UNIT 1 (READING)**

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**Resource Material**

# The Rise and Fall of Mr Fox

Once he had it all: good looks, fame and the affection of millions. As the hunting season gets under way, **Adam Edwards** asks: where did it all go wrong?



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In England, Mr Fox was hunted as vermin for centuries and he was always despised for his killing for pleasure, particularly of chickens. But in the twentieth century, his image changed. He became as lovable as Basil Brush, as cute as a Disney character.

So who then was to blame for giving the fox an image makeover, turning him into a victim of oppression? It was the poet John Masefield. In 1919, he wrote his hugely popular poem 'Reynard the Fox' which described the magic of country life and demonstrated a touching compassion for the animal. Over the following years, slowly but surely, the fox started to benefit from a public relations campaign that any *X Factor* contestant would die for. Advertisers cast him as an amusing fellow and Disney put the seal on his heroic status by turning him into a cartoon Robin Hood in 1981's *The Fox and the Hound*.

The makeover coincided with the rise and rise of the urban fox. He was protected by an army (the Animal Liberation Front), fawned over by animal charities and bunny-huggers, and finally saved from persecution by the law. He also began to find shelter among the houses of the suburbs and their long, lush gardens. He made slow progress at first, but now it is a rare night when residents in London do not record the carnivore on the prowl. The fox is regularly seen, even in daylight, in supermarket car parks, behind shopping centres, and scrabbling through bins near fast food shops. Each generation of foxes becomes more used to the ways of the town and is more able to deal with traffic. He has no predators, except man, and no shortage of food.

It is hard to believe that an animal so blessed as Mr Fox could, so casually, have chucked away his burnished image. Yet this summer he managed to do just that.

In 2010, he bit and mauled baby twins as they slept in their cot in London. And suddenly it dawned on the urban population of Britain that Basil Brush had a beastly side. He was nothing more than a feral chav, breeding indiscriminately and feeding off discarded buckets of KFC.

Last month it was revealed that he had crept into London Zoo and killed 11 penguins. For fun. Worse still, he decapitated the Queen's flamingos at Buckingham Palace and killed a number of pet rabbits, owned, unfortunately for him, by the children of various newspaper writers who then let rip in print.

It has not deterred him, and the charge sheet grows weekly: a woman in Fulham had her ear savagely bitten while sleeping in her bedroom. A baby boy was attacked in Dartford. In Islington a young girl had her arm mauled as she slept.

Across London, cries for the curbing of Reynard are mounting. Some have called – presumably in jest – for urban hunts to be introduced. It is hard for anyone in the countryside not to take pleasure in the misfortunes of the townies, particularly if you were one of the half million who demonstrated against the ban on foxhunting.

Actually, the only surprise in the fox's recent reversal of fortunes is that he was ever thought of as lovable in the first place. His cunning was first noted in the Bible, and in European folklore he has always symbolised trickery and deceit. In children's literature he rarely emerges with any credit. Even where the fox is a hero, as in Roald Dahl's *Fantastic Mr Fox*, he is also seen as a thief.

The events of 2010 are proof that the urban fox is more fearless than ever and there is no immediate solution to the problem. Shooting is the most effective form of control, but it is of limited practical use in towns and generally unpopular with local people. As a result, many councils have given up trying to control the fox at all.

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