

Born to be wild

Elizabeth Olive on the lives and fates of foxes, in the wild or in a cage

The rice fields are empty now. At night the stubble where the stalks of rice stood, glitter with frost. Sometimes if there's enough light from the moon we can glimpse foxes cavorting through these shadowy lines of stubble. These are young foxes more intent on having fun than joining their parents in the serious work of finding food. There must be several families in the area. Their dens are carefully concealed in the steep hillsides way above the paddies, beneath the pines. They call to each other in a high bark. Would like to get to know them better but being nocturnal animals it would mean forfeiting a lot of sleep to study them.

One of the most fascinating studies of foxes I have ever read is to be found in the book 'The Darkness is Light Enough' by Chris Ferris (not her real name for reasons that become obvious if you read her story). She became a naturalist by chance. She suffered severe back pain as the result of an old injury which meant she couldn't sleep properly at night. If she got up and walked around the pain diminished. At first she tried to find jobs to do around the house and garden but neighbours began to think she was potty. Instead she took to wandering further afield, through the woods and fields. She would wander from midnight till dawn taking notes of anything she observed on the way. Gradually she developed nightvision and being small she could use narrow tracks and holes like the animals she was observing. This ability to see easily on the darkest night and to move silently and swiftly through familiar territory ensured her rapid escape when she encountered the ugly side of the wildlife's

world; the human predators, those seeking to snare, net, shoot and trap the animals she had come to know intimately and which she did her utmost to protect.

For fifteen years nearly every night in all weathers and conditions she recorded the movements, behaviour and habits of badgers, foxes, tawny owls and other nocturnal animals. Her diary spanning five years forms the basis of her book. In her early months of watching night after night, she was just there. The animals avoided her. Later they became curious but kept their distance. Finally as she sat immobile they came to sniff her and the breakthrough came when badgers claimed her as part of their social group by musking her. When they found her scent trail they would follow her so that she came to know them all as individuals. She could touch and groom them. This trust made it possible for her to rescue them from snares, to warn them of dangers, to give first aid to injured animals, and bring them back to health with antibiotics. She never did this unless she felt the animal's life was at stake. These animals were born wild and should remain wild and free from human interference.

Quite different is the story of another fox born in the confines of a tiny cage and destined to life of imprisonment until the day it ended up wrapped around someone's neck. Fortunately the horrors of the fur trade have been so well publicised that having dead animals draped around your neck, or anywhere else in face, is now not only unfashionable but down right repulsive. So with the trade virtually having dried up in the western world, the struggling furriers are focussing their greed on the lucrative Japanese market, where fur still has a certain snob appeal. Particularly stupid in a country where the temperature seldom drops below zero.

Whether Mercury, the fox in this tale, was destined for fur or merely to be kept as an exotic pet, we shall never know. All we do know is that she was found tied, wound round a tree in a Kobe park. The police seeing

her as a public hazard managed to get her into a cage and transport her to Oji Zoo which point blank refused to accept her. When she reached here she was a snarling shivering wreck. The next day at the vet's we discovered the cause of her misery. A choke chain, probably put on when she was a cub, had become embedded in her neck and was festering. Under anaesthetic the vet cut through the muscle that had grown over the chain and stitched her up. She weighed just over 6 kgs and was about a year old. We can only guess that she had been kept in a miserable pet shop probably chained inside a cage slowly dying of strangulation.

The transformation once we got her back home was amazing. Put in a secure room in the barn she romped and raced around, probably the first time she had been able to stretch in her life. She bites, not surprisingly, but is not in the least aggressive, in fact very curious and playful. She likes raw meat or sardines but immediately scent-marks food by peeing on it. Then she buries it under the pile of newspaper and straw where she keeps her hoard. We will have to build her an outside enclosure soon because unfortunately she can never be released into the wild, much as we would like her to have her freedom. She is a silver Arctic fox not indigenous to Japan. If we let her go we would be interfering with the natural balance of native foxes that live around here. She would have no territory and no mates. Whatever we build will have to have sturdy foundations and high netting because foxes both tunnel and climb. It's the closest to freedom we can offer.

Mercury is only one example of the appalling trade in exotic animals existing in Japan. Visit any pet shop and you'll find animals which are totally unsuitable for pets, many imported illegally as the Government turns a blind eye despite being a signatory to the Washington Treaty limiting trade in endangered species. Most housing here can hardly accommodate the domestic cat in comfort let alone foxes, iguanas, monkeys eagles or the thousands of other wild species these shops sell to the beguiled public. Don't be tempted to buy anything

because you feel sorry for it. They'll replace it with another as soon as you've left the shop. Instead complain to city offices, write to the Central Government or better still to newspapers abroad. Persuade Japanese friends that computer games are a lot more fun to play with than living animals. If people stop buying, this cruel trade will cease to exist. It's as simple as that.

Elizabeth Oliver