

A close-up, high-resolution photograph of a dog's face, likely a Shetland Sheepdog or Rough Collie, with thick, golden-brown fur and striking amber eyes. The dog is looking directly at the camera with a calm expression. The background is softly blurred, showing more of the dog's fur.

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DISTRIBUTION

AIRPORT ANIMAL STORIES

A 52' documentary
Directed by Marie-Hélène Baconnet
Produced by ARTE G.E.I.E and Ecomedia

Pitch

Wild plains sprawl under our planes. There are 600 airports and aerodromes in France, representing about 500 km² of meadows, the equivalent of a regional park. At a time when our birds are disappearing from the countryside, when fauna in general is in danger, these «archipelagos» scattered throughout the territory can serve as refuges, reservoirs of recolonization for species that can then thrive.

There is no better way to understand this than by following a fox's daily explorations while hunting its prey on the grounds of an airport. Together with a hundred other foxes, he controls the 20,000-strong rabbit population that lives in the tall grass: they dig galleries under the runways and get sucked in or blown out by the engines, endangering the planes and their passengers. Here, the fox is not a pest. It regulates the presence of rodents and lagomorphs.

But many other animals threaten the safety of aircraft: various species of birds, sedentary or migratory, deer, hares, even wild boars. As we learn more about the canid's life, we discover that the local fauna can coexist with humans, and that certain environmental stakes can be compatible with the use of planes.



Synopsis

You do not have to go far from our sprawling metropolises to find a place where nature flourishes in all its beauty and richness. In these vast meadows, sheltered from human agitation, an exceptional wildlife has thrived. This space of preserved wild life in the heart of the urban universe is an airport – of all places.

To enter this universe with its codes and particular laws, between two plane take-offs, our story will be told from the point of view of a fox. This cunning animal will serve as a bridge between our worlds. As the hours, days and seasons go by, the fox's encounters with the thousands of rabbits, birds, plants and insects that share the airport grounds form the main thread of this film.

The fox is both a witness and an actor of the important times in the animals' lives. Spring is the time of births in the fox's burrow, in the rabbit's tunnel and in the bird' nest. And when summer comes, the young animals (especially birds) learn about the dangers of living near huge planes. In autumn, the airport sees a massive influx of migratory birds and the dispersion of the young ones born in spring.

The fox crosses paths with the banes of airports: pigeons, starlings, gulls, common buzzards, kestrels and swifts. In the 1960s, architects were unaware of the birds' habits. They thought they were building nothing less than ultra-modern glass and steel walls. When actually they created cliffs studded with holes and multiple perches where the birds could breed in the best possible conditions. Who would have thought those modern airports would become gigantic nesting boxes?

Here, animals and foxes enjoy total freedom and security. They are neither hunted nor persecuted, but their kingdom has clear-cut borders: they are forbidden to approach the runways reserved for airplanes, on pain of death – for them as well as for the planes' passengers. Each season has its perils. The spring and autumn migration periods are high risk times. In late spring, as they leave the nest, young, inexperienced birds fly about aimlessly. Gradually, the birds at the airport learn to modify their behavior, to adapt.



Producer's note

"Animals of the Airport" will be a groundbreaking documentary putting us in the paws of a fox named Goupil. Its life on an airport in a temperate European region will be an opportunity for us to observe, through all four seasons, the animal species which knew how to adapt to this particular environment and disturb the traffic. This fictional airport will be a blend of the Orly, Roissy, Beauvais and even Issy les Moulineaux French airports... among others.

Because of the coronavirus crisis, the number of flights has decreased by 60 to 80%. Local animals wasted no time in taking over the land abandoned by humans and their noisy machines. Most of the staff, including those in charge of green spaces and animal risk prevention, is on furlough. Less human activity also means the animals reproduce in greater numbers, show themselves more in the open and go about their business without fear. Paradoxically, they have become much more dangerous for the (now occasional) airplanes and give much more work to the teams left in charge of preventing animal risks. In late spring and summer, young birds, more numerous than usual but much less used to airplanes, are careless: they fly anywhere and everywhere and cause many collisions due to lack of experience. When there was one take-off or landing per minute, the birds were quicker to understand the danger and kept their distance.

All aeronautical activity has been slowed down due to the pandemic; a blessing in disguise for wildlife filmmakers, who benefit from exceptionally quiet conditions to film animals who are now more numerous and bolder than ever.

The wide shots, the behaviors and the specific situations will be filmed in situ. On the other hand, for certain shots such as babies inside burrows, the inside of cave birds' nests or certain hunting scenes, unless we are exceptionally lucky, we will have to rely on wildlife experts' know-how. To film in situ, we will have the support of the airport teams who manage the green spaces and animal risk prevention, as well as an association of biologists: "Aerobiodiversity".

For some years now, thanks to these scientists, airports have been encouraging the growth of plants that do not attract the species known as "at risk" for aircraft, particularly among birds. Thus, over the years, they have learned to manage animal risk in an ecological way by eliminating anything that attracts animals and encourages them to settle on site.

To encourage the birds to move elsewhere, the managers use sound and visual scare tactics: emission of distress cries, firing of detonating or crackling rockets, laser torches, but also biological control. It consisted, in particular in Orly, to let a small population of strictly protected red foxes settle down - an exception in France - to limit the number of rabbits. "Animals of the Airport" is the story of these foxes.



Director's note

My job is to explore the planet to meet animals up close. I often have to travel by plane. Like many passengers, at takeoff time, I often observed rabbits frolicking in the grass near the runway. Where there is fire, there is smoke, and so from the presence of rabbits I deduced that of foxes, and tried to see them.

But foxes are less numerous, more cautious and therefore more difficult to see. I had never succeeded in spotting one near the runway; but I enjoyed imagining what could be happening in the tall grass, away from human eyes.

The airport is a world apart. This is the first time that a major documentary is being made about airport wildlife. Airport Animals will be told from the point of view of the fox. The beauty, vivacity and intelligence of this animal are exceptional.

Therefore, the animals as well as the humans, their airplanes, their yellow cars and their orange vests will be seen from afar and from below, at fox height!

AIRPORT ANIMALS is shot in a temperate European area, we will not provide the audience with further details. For the coherence and homogeneity of the fauna, but also because these airports are exemplary in their environmental protection programs in general and the fauna in particular, I chose the airports of Orly and Roissy Charles de Gaulle as the setting, without the commentary situating the images. It is about the "airport animals" and not about a particular airport.

On the airport, two worlds come together, or rather coexist separately. That of the planes and the infrastructures: buildings, signs, reflections, lights, etc., a very graphic one; and that of the animals: wild, an unexpected nature on an airport. In contrast with the expected runways and the infrastructures, nature offers a completely different landscape. The film will play on this contrast which makes this space so special. The airport plays the role of a natural reserve without being one, because it is not its primary vocation.

Marie-Hélène Baconnet





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