



Pretty fur out, man The queue for the toilet at a furies convention can get quite long...

The fursuit of happiness

The LondonFurs are a group of 'furries' who love to dress as anthropomorphic animals. As they groom themselves for their annual summer celebration this weekend, **Alix Fox** (who else?) meets them. Prepare for a shaggy dog story... Photography **Tom Broadbent**

Why did the chicken cross the road? To meet a neon-green kangaroo, a tiger sporting a leather jacket and a striped mohican, a dinosaur-cum-kitten with a heart-shaped nose, and around 300 other guests attending the LondonFurs Summer Weekender taking place in the capital this Friday and Saturday. They'll be partying on a boat, dancing, drinking and marching around the Tower Millennium Pier area... many of them wearing crazy creature costumes. And no, it isn't really a sexual thing.

'Furries' are a subculture of folk with a shared interest in dressing up as animals with human personalities and characteristics, and elaborate custom mascot-style outfits, at parties and even in flashmobs. And the hosts of this weekend's party, LondonFurs (www.londonfurs.org.uk), are the UK's biggest 'furry fandom' members' community. So who are these people, why are they so enchanted by made-up man-imals and what's the attraction of pretending to be them? To find out, I persuaded two LondonFurs pack leaders –

'Lupus', a wolf, and 'Ani Boxer', a dog – to let me attend one of their events.

LondonFurs has been running for over a decade, and holds socials every three weeks, as well as a handful of grander annual events – fur balls, if you will – which draw furry friends aged from 18 to somewhere in their forties from as far afield as Glasgow and even South Africa. When I arrive – complete with red cartoon insect head – at a smart drinking den called Amber Bar beneath a swanky office in Moorgate, I'm greeted with a spirited hug



Hungry like the wolf
Trying to attract a Saturday night beaver?

by one of the organisers. Alfa Fox is resplendent in his vulpine 'fursuit', a complete costume that covers his whole body. Around a quarter of people at the party are wearing full suits (many go for the cheaper options of ears- or tail-only). The quality and complexity of these second skins is impressive. A lot of hobbyists are drawn to the furry fandom in part because it offers an opportunity to collaboratively geek-gasm over making them. I spot a lion whose torso has been padded and shaded to resemble rippling muscles; a gargyle-esque hybrid named Zuki with light-up 3D eyes, and a guy demonstrating his remote-controlled canine ears which prick up, rotate or lay flat to demonstrate his character's mood.

They are masterpieces – but fur can come with a four-figure price tag. The cost of a suit from admired American manufacturer One Fur All (www.onefurall.com) can hit £1,700, yet the waiting list is still at least a year long.

'I got a bit of a bargain on my suit, from Fur Happens,' says Alfa Fox, 'but the upkeep is still a pretty penny – I have to regularly reheel my paws.'

So why spend so much money and time in order to hang out in unusually sophisticated onesies? Many furies say that role-playing offers a respite from reality, a bit like amateur dramatics, except you get to choose your own cuddly character. Invented 'fursonas' can allow individuals to act out behaviours that they aspire to but don't feel confident enough to adopt in everyday life, or that might be considered cheeky under normal circumstances. Fenneck, a blue and white male fox, says, 'When I'm in my fursuit, I feel I have permission to enjoy being far more hyperactive and silly than I'd usually get away with.' It's also therapeutic: 'My fursona is also quite sweetly naive; I use it as a vehicle to re-experience some of the innocence of childhood, which has helped me work through a period of depression.' Alfa Fox agrees: 'As Alfa, I can be immensely stupid and goofy, and no one looks at me like I'm being weird. While devising his appearance, it was of utmost importance to me

that he had a playful grin, and eyes that seem as though they're in permanent amazement at everything. In real life, I sometimes feel jaded, but when I become Alfa, I see things in a new way.'

As well as feeling able to act differently within themselves, furies get a different, friendlier reaction from other people when they're hairy compared to when they're human. Put on a cute 'n' squishy novelty suit and go on a public parade, as is common at furry meets, and strangers that would otherwise ignore you might approach for a chat, a photo or even a cuddle. 'Society is cynical – in everyday life you're generally treated with suspicion if you smile at someone,' Alfa Fox tells me, 'but when you're dressed as an anthropomorphic animal, people beam at you, and kids' faces light up. Folks open up.' Not everyone's prepared to hug a furry. But being one can, it seems, impart warm, fuzzy feelings.

Speaking of feelings, it's a pet hate of the furry tribe that some assume all fandom members are sexual fetishists or 'furverts'. I'm sure that a proportion of them extend aspects of role playing into their private lives – but that's far from unusual in wider sexual culture anyway. Consider the universally lusted-after Playboy bunny.

Having joined them in fur garb for the night, I'm also convinced that intercourse in a full fursuit would cause dangerous levels of overheating. The hilarious, booze-soaked, good-natured LondonFurs events are unequivocally *not* sex parties. There is, however, lots of friendly patting, coat-stroking, grooming and hugging. It's instinctive to want to embrace someone covered in plush textile whose wide-eyed face has specifically been designed to look adorable. Another bonus is that layers of faux fur and stuffing help to alleviate the body consciousness that renders some people embarrassed to receive a squeeze, while wearing an animal head can conceal your blushes and ease social anxieties.

I do spy the odd saucy sketch, mind. Party guest Omega Warrior (sic) shows me a cheeky furry-themed graphic novel he's drawn. 'You'll hear a lot of furies tell you that their fascination with fantasy creatures began when they were young,' he says, 'via comic books, TV programmes like "Thundercats", and films such as Disney's "Robin Hood".' And their preferred term for who they are – 'furies' – is believed to have been coined at a sci-fi convention in 1980, to describe the fleecy beasts in a particular comic, along with their avid fans. Several attendees suggest that as some furies get older, their tastes naturally become more adult,

hence the kinkier images of Catwoman-style characters and mammals with mega mammarys found in a lot of amateur furry art.

Among the LondonFurs there's a higher-than-average proportion of members who are gay or bi. 'That doesn't surprise me,' says Callum, a relative newbie to the scene who has attended three meets. 'The fandom is one of the most friendly, accepting, open-hearted bunch of people I've ever met. Your sexual orientation doesn't matter. It's cool if you're nerdy, or awkward, or shy, too – you're always welcomed.' Fenneck shares his endorsement, adding, 'I've made so many great furry mates, and I've even landed a job through my hobby.' His employment? Working in a department store... in the pet supplies section.

The next LondonFurs meet is on Fri Jul 19 and Sat Jul 20. www.londonfurs.org.uk

FOREIGN LANGUAGE

How to talk to the animals



yiff

'Yiff!' was originally an upbeat greeting, or an expression of enthusiasm. Nowadays, it also has a saucy overtone: the word can be used in much the same way as the term 'phwoar!', and describing something as 'yiffy' is to consider it sexy.

scritch

The act of affectionately scratching a furry's back, neck or between their ears using your fingers or claws.

fur pile

A group of furies chilling out together, lazing and lying around. Stopping to rest and rehydrate is essential if you're wearing a weighty fursuit. It can sometimes involve cosying up and pally snuggling.

confuzzled

The UK's largest furry convention. The 2014 event will take place near Birmingham International Airport next May, theme to be announced. www.confuzzled.org.uk

fur affinity

The furry fandom's largest online forum, where music, art and stories are shared. www.furaffinity.net

