

Species Interactions

Red foxes, a non-native species to BHI, have a detrimental effect on native species, several of which are state and federally protected due to declining numbers. Loggerhead sea turtle eggs & hatchlings as well as the eggs of several species of nesting shorebirds (oystercatchers, piping plovers, Wilson's plovers and least terns) are heavily predated upon by red foxes. Often times an entire nest is destroyed by the fox, resulting in no offspring. When this happens annually it becomes impossible for a species to sustain itself.



Photo by
Donna Finley

People & Foxes: *How You Can Help*

WARNING! **DO NOT FEED RED FOXES!**

Please **DO NOT** attempt to touch, taunt, or feed foxes. A red fox that has been fed by people loses its natural fear of humans, and is more likely to approach people and golf carts for food. By feeding foxes you not only break the law and endanger yourself, but you are putting those who follow at risk!

Feeding foxes and other wildlife on Bald Head Island is *unkind* and *unnecessary*! Unattended pets, children, or even careless behavior by adults around foxes and their habitats can lead to unfortunate incidents. By being aware of these animals we ensure that foxes and people safely coexist on Bald Head. If you suspect a fox is being harassed or acting in an aggressive manner, please contact the BHI Conservancy (910-457-0089) or the BHI Police (910-457-5252) to report the incident.

Summary

Red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) inhabit the maritime forest and secondary dunes on Bald Head and Middle Islands. Foxes are naturally cautious and shy; however, due to the unnecessary feeding of foxes by humans they have become bold and brazen. Please remember that while the red fox is beautiful and may seem harmless, it is a *wild and unpredictable* animal that will bite if provoked.

Although the red fox is non-native to coastal southeastern North Carolina, it is our responsibility to learn how to live in accord with it. By observing from afar, and not habituating these animals to humans, we can safely keep foxes as an interesting and attractive part of Bald Head Island's unique environment.

Please call the Conservancy at 457-0089 if you see anyone feeding or harassing red foxes!



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Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)



Photo by Maureen Dewire

Important Information for Bald Head Island Residents and Visitors

As development continues on Bald Head Island, we continue to displace many plants and animals. If we wish to live in harmony with nature, we must learn to co-exist with these organisms. One animal that has become more visible on Bald Head Island is the red fox, *Vulpes vulpes*.

Red foxes are primarily nocturnal although they are occasionally out during daylight hours. It is extremely important for all of our visitors to understand that foxes should NEVER be fed; there is a Village ordinance that prohibits this on Bald Head! Foxes are naturally shy; however, they lose their natural fear of humans when fed, becoming accustomed or attracted to people. Foxes that have been fed are more likely to bite humans and become nuisance animals that end up being destroyed or relocated. Feeding wild foxes presents a danger not only to the feeder, but to those who innocently follow behind. Hopefully, the information here will help you better understand this beautiful animal so that you may respect and enjoy their presence from a safe distance.

Safety

Please keep in mind these important fox safety tips when visiting Bald Head Island:

1. Do NOT feed the red foxes or any other wildlife; violators will be fined \$500;
2. Do not allow your children or pets to approach foxes;
3. Do not approach any obvious fox dens;
4. Observe foxes from a safe distance; never get closer than 20 feet and if it approaches you, back away;
5. Do not harass, taunt or throw objects at foxes; violators will be fined;
6. If you suspect a fox of aggressive behavior, move away from the area and contact the BHI Conservancy (910-457-0089) and the BHI Police (910-457-5252);
7. Foxes are known carriers of rabies and distemper; please keep your distance!



Photo by Maureen Dewire

Physical Features

- The red fox resembles a bushy-tailed, medium sized dog
- Usual coloration is a bright rusty-red with black feet and legs and a whitish belly
- A good identifying feature is the long tail which is tipped with white
- The average lifespan of a red fox in the wild is between 2-4 years
- Red foxes measure in total length from 39-41 inches and weigh between 10 and 20 pounds



Habitat & History

Red foxes are found across much of North America and are common throughout the state of North Carolina. The red fox is one of two fox species found in North Carolina, the second being the gray fox, also present on Bald Head Island. Gray foxes are the only canine capable of climbing trees, making them less visible around the island. An easy way to tell the difference between the 2 species is the lack of a white tip on the tail of gray foxes and the coat color of the gray fox is much darker and less red than that of the red fox.

Red foxes were not originally found in this part of the country and therefore are considered a non-native, invasive species. European settlers released red foxes brought from Europe and other parts of northern North America into the eastern US. Red foxes were imported primarily for the sport of hunting, a popular European pastime. Since then, the red fox has gradually expanded its range. Besides being a game animal, the red fox is of some importance in the fur industry.

The red fox is a top predator on BHI, with very little competition. The occasional transient coyote or bobcat are the only natural predators the red fox may face on the island. Large owls, such as the great horned, may also act as a predator especially on the kits.

Food

The red fox is an agile, skillful hunter, feeding on a wide variety of foods. They are often seen consuming mice, lizards, snakes, and various plants and insects. All of these food sources are plentiful on Bald Head Island.

Unfortunately, due to the recent population explosion of red foxes on Bald Head Island and throughout North Carolina the red foxes have been predated sea turtle nests and consuming turtle eggs and hatchlings.

Mating

Male and female red foxes primarily form monogamous pairs each winter and will dig a den to raise their young. The young foxes (called kits or pups), averaging 4 or 5 in number, are born after a gestation period of 52 days. Both of the parents help care for the young, although the male provides most of the food for both the kits and the female until the kits are old enough to stay alone. After they are about a month old, the young kits begin to venture outside the den. By



late summer or early fall, the kits are old enough to leave the den and begin living alone. The red fox reaches sexual maturity by the time they are ten months old.

Red fox den on Bald Head Island

Photo by Maureen Dewire

Behavior

Red foxes remain active throughout the year but are primarily nocturnal animals. Red foxes have the reputation of being cunning, but naturally shy. Like most other members of the wild dog family, they seem to be quite intelligent and are very adaptable, often learning to live quite close to humans.

In general, each fox claims its own territory. Socially, the fox communicates with body language and a variety of vocalizations. It also communicates with scent, marking food and territorial boundary lines with urine and feces.