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The Foxes of Salisbury Beach

by Deborah A. Venuti

I first heard of Red Fox sightings at Salisbury Beach State Reservation in the spring of 2011. Two young kits were observed lazing in the sun on top of a dune at the far end of the reservation. These habitats are protected against human intrusion to preserve the fragile ecosystem of wild plants, flowers, and nesting birds, so the foxes were always observed and photographed from a distance.



Salisbury Beach is a complex barrier beach system, comprised of coastal beach, coastal dunes and salt marsh. The Salisbury Beach State Reservation, which is managed by the

Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), is concentrated at the southern end of Salisbury Beach adjacent to the Merrimack River, and extends in a northerly direction along 3.8 miles of the Atlantic Ocean to the New Hampshire border. This extensive barrier beach system plays a critical role in the protection of the Merrimack River estuary, along with associated salt marsh habitat, dune preservation, and habitat for threatened and endangered species and other wildlife.

In 2008, the Massachusetts Legislature established the Salisbury Beach Preservation Trust to ensure long-term preservation and maintenance of the Beach. The 521-acre park offers camping, swimming, boating, fishing, and new bathhouses and playgrounds. Many areas were replanted with American beach grass (*Ammophila breviligulata*) after storms such as the "No Name" storm of 1991 ravaged the coastline. The combination of natural resources and public facilities and amenities at Salisbury Beach makes it one of the most attractive and popular recreational areas in Massachusetts.

My first extended contact with this fox family was on a May evening. There was no sign of them during the day, though I had found tracks along one of their trails. I had pinpointed a meadow where they might hunt, so I waited on the boardwalk over-

looking the meadow. It was almost completely dark when I became aware of a young fox at the edge of the bushes. The first fox was followed closely by her sister. They moved silently into the meadow, listening, tilting their heads and poking their noses into the grass. Suddenly a third fox was there, slightly larger and stockier, probably the mom. The three of them hunted, pouncing on things I couldn't see. There were other evenings when we saw as many as seven foxes in the meadow - obviously two or more families.

Adult Red Foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) are wary of humans, and they often hunt in the early morning and in the evening. The females (vixens) are small, weighing about 15 pounds, while the males (dog foxes) are larger, with a slim body and long legs. They can have golden, red, grey, or even silver fur, with black "leggings" and a long dark tail tipped with white. The kits are brownish-grey when born, and later develop their signature red coloring. Foxes are omnivorous, preferring small rodents: mice, shrews, rabbits and squirrels, but also eating sea birds, eggs, plants and berries. Because they are so adaptable, they are listed as a species of "Least Concern" on the International Endangered List.

Several more times during the summer I went to the reservation and watched the two young foxes. As the kits grew up and got bolder, they were more active outside the den. They would hunt, play tag and wrestle in the grass. One foggy day I watched as they chased each other all around the den, running and leaping through the grass.

Another day, one kit was sleeping on top of the den, when I saw her shift, get up, and move over to sit in the grass. A little face appeared in the ground. The second kit emerged from the den, shook the dirt off, stretched and yawned before joining her sister in the grass.

To see these young wild animals in their natural surroundings, taking as little notice of me as if I had been a seagull, was an unequaled experience. When the foxes got older, they left the den and hunted alone, roaming more widely across the reservation. It's very possible that the mother will return to the den this winter to have another litter, and I'll visit them again. ❖

Deborah A. Venuti is a Sierra Club member and professional photographer. All photos by the author, used by permission. Sources: DCR Salisbury Beach State Reservation, Barrier Beach Management Plan, September 2008.

Endangered Species Act Under Attack

Endangered species need our help! An effort to gut the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act (MESA) has gained support in the legislature. Many phone calls are needed to our elected officials, especially to Senator Marc Pacheco and Representative Anne Gobi, co-chairs of the Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture. Please ask them to be sure MESA is not weakened.

The forces that are attempting to gut MESA are making highly misleading claims, including what has become a favorite ploy: claiming that environmental regulations cause a loss of jobs. Your help to defeat this unjustified attack is urgently needed! We urge you to contact Chairman Pacheco and Chairwoman Gobi today – by phone, email or mail – to ask them to protect endangered species and table “SB1854”. Be sure to let your representative and senator know where you stand. Senator Pacheco’s number is 617-722-1551; Representative Gobi’s is 617-722-2210. The urgency is such that we are also asking our members to call Governor Patrick’s office at 617-725-4005. *Please visit the Chapter web site to learn more.*



*Salisbury Beach wildlife photos
© Deborah A. Venuti, used by permission.
You can find more of Deborah's photo's at
www.facebook.com/debphotog*

Celebrating 50 Years of Wilderness Preservation

The Wilderness Act was signed into law in 1964. The Sierra Club, other wilderness groups, and the four federal wilderness managing agencies are getting ready to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act in 2014. We invite you to get involved and be part of this big national celebration to applaud what a major achievement the National Wilderness Preservation System is for our country. Help make our celebrations in Massachusetts a memorable part of 2014. To make this happen, we need to start planning now.

Nationwide there are over 100 million acres Congress has added to the Wilderness Preservation system so far -- with more to come over the years. Wilderness designation is the strongest and most permanent protection that can be extended to our Federal public lands. Wilderness areas include wild places in National Parks, National Forests, wildlife refuges, and western lands of the Bureau of Land Management.

Although we don't have any federally-designated Wilderness areas in Massachusetts, there are some in neighboring states Vermont and New Hampshire. Our state equivalent lands are the Reserves that the Department of Conservation and Recreation is currently in the process of designating.

During 2014, we hope to have our own local celebrations in coordination with the national Sierra Club. Ideas include possible wilderness or nature-related art shows, concerts, and possibly lectures. We're working on organizing some outings, especially hikes in some of the Reserves and in Wilderness areas in our neighboring states.

To make this happen, we need your help. As 50th anniversary coordinator for the Massachusetts Chapter, I am looking for some helpers who are enthusiastic about wilderness and who are interested in helping us celebrate -- and who may have some ideas about ways we can promote and publicize wilderness during 2014. I hope that means you! Please contact me at ecampbell@sierraclubmass.org.

Elisa Campbell, Chapter Wilderness50 coordinator

