

Searching Oregon for a rare red fox

By KYLE SPURR
The Bulletin

BEND (AP) — In a dense forest at the base of Mount Bachelor, two wildlife biologists slowly walked toward a small cage trap they hoped would contain a rare red fox species. Jamie Bowles, an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife technician in Bend, and Tim Hiller, founder of the Montana-based Wildlife Ecology Institute, stepped carefully as branches crunched under their feet.

For the past year, the state wildlife agency and Hiller’s organization have worked together to trap and place radio collars on Sierra Nevada red foxes, a rarely seen subspecies recently discovered roaming in the Oregon Cascades. Officials have no idea how many live in Oregon, and fewer than 100 live in Northern California.

On the sunny Friday morning in June, the trap was empty, as were two other traps the biologists set near Mount Bachelor.

“This is a typical day for us,” Bowles said. “Not having anything in the traps.”

But the past year has been a success for their efforts to study the Sierra Nevada red fox, which they began researching in 2012.

When a fox was trapped and given a radio collar in May 2017, it was hailed as a first for Oregon wildlife biologists, who suspected the small mammals were here, but had little proof.

Since, six more have been captured and given collars. Last month, Bowles collared three in one week, two of them in one day.

In addition, hikers and campers have steadily reported Sierra Nevada red fox sightings in the last 12 months.

The collars, programed to stay on the foxes for one year, track the foxes as they move through the area. Data shows the collared foxes stay in an 8-mile radius near Mount Bachelor. The biologists believe the foxes have become comfortable around people and are relying on being fed or are rummaging for food in dumpsters at the Mt. Bachelor ski area.

Their reliance is not safe for them or people and their pets, Bowles said. The foxes can carry diseases, such as rabies.

“This is not ideal that they are foraging for food out of the trash cans or begging for food,” Bowles said. “These foxes seem to be resort foxes.”

Outside of the Mount Bachelor area, more people are reporting sightings of the Sierra Nevada red foxes. People are seeing them in the high elevations mountains, such as the Three Sisters Wilderness, but also in lower elevations areas in



Andy Tullis/The Bulletin via AP

In this May 2016 photo, Sierra Nevada red fox wanders near Mt. Bachelor, west of Bend.



Joe Kline/The Bulletin via AP

Jamie Bowles, a wildlife tech with the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife, uses an antenna to pick up signals from radio collared Sierra Nevada red foxes near Mt. Bachelor, west of Bend.

Tumalo and Terrebonne.

Citizen reports are helpful for the biologists. The foxes were thought to only live in high elevation above 4,500 feet. Bowles and Hiller have 16 traps set in various elevations across the region where the foxes have been seen.

“We are finding them in places we didn’t expect to find them,” Bowles said.

A huge component of the study is learning more about their range and dispersal, the biologists said.

“We want to know what habitat they are utilizing,” Bowles said. “Both in the high, mid and low elevation now that we know they have dispersed lower.”

When the study began in

2012, it relied on trail cameras and fur and scat collection. The initial work found the foxes living in the Oregon Cascades including Mt. Jefferson and Mt. Washington. It gave the biologists an area to set traps and begin tracking the foxes. Each trap consists of bait, usually pieces of roadkill deer, to lure the foxes.

The study is funded through federal grants and support from various agencies. Hiller estimates the grants and in-kind support is valued at about \$100,000. The study has funding for another year, during which the biologist hope to collar and track 13 more foxes.

The High Desert Museum supports the study through its

own carnivore-monitoring project in the Deschutes National Forest. The museum has 13 trail cameras set up to capture video of animals, including the Sierra Nevada red fox.

The museum hosts an educational program for local children and their families that allows them to take home a trail camera for six weeks and capture images of passing animals.

Last year, one family in the program captured valuable footage of a Sierra Nevada red fox in the lower elevation of Dry Canyon in Redmond.

Jon Nelson, curator of wildlife at the museum, said he regularly gets tips from people about Sierra Nevada red fox sightings. Just this week, someone reported seeing a den. Nelson passed the tip on to the biologists.

“The museum’s role has been to educate the public and increase awareness about the species,” Nelson said. “As a result, there are a lot of people in the community who are looking for them or recognize them when they see them.”

DNA samples collected off the collared foxes have been sent to a laboratory at the University of California, Davis. The results confirmed the foxes are Sierra Nevada red foxes and they are living in lower elevations than originally thought, Bowles said.

The DNA data could confirm if the Oregon foxes are able to breed with the Califor-

nia foxes. If so, that could boost each region’s population.

Sierra Nevada red foxes in California are on a waiting list for protection under the federal Endangered Species Act. In Oregon, there is not enough information about the foxes to be on a federal listing. But the foxes are an Oregon Conservation Strategy Species, which means the species’ population is unknown and could be at risk and also may be in need of conservation efforts.

Within the conservation strategy, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife is seeking answers about the foxes’ population, how they use their dens and how they interact with coyotes, Hiller said.

The biologists are learning about the species. The Sierra Nevada red foxes are generally smaller, weighing about 8 pounds. They have similar characteristics to other red fox subspecies in the West, including the Cascade and Rocky Mountain red fox.

Hiller said he always assumed the foxes spotted in Oregon were Cascade red foxes because Sierra Nevada mountains seemed too far away. Hiller is not sure if these Oregon foxes are native or came from California. But through his research, he discovered the Columbia River acts as a barrier between the Sierra Nevada red foxes to the south and Cascade red foxes to the north in Washington and British Columbia.

BLOOMIN’ BLUES

Blue Kittentails a rare sighting in the Blues

By BRUCE BARNES
For The East Oregonian

Name: Blue Kittentails
Scientific name: *Synthyris missurica*

This attractive plant is fairly easy to spot if you come across it, though I’ve seen it only a few times. The last time I saw it was ten years ago. It is known from the Columbia Gorge and southeast Washington to northern California, to Montana. There are nine species of *Synthyris* in the western mountains of North America, but this is the only one in the Blue Mountains.

The scientific genus name *Synthyris* is from the Greek syn for united or joined, and thyris for a door or valve. This name refers to tiny slits in the seed capsule, which open to release the seeds. The species name *missurica* was given to this plant by a botanist in 1818. The botanist knew that Lewis and Clark collected

the plant near the Clearwater River in Idaho, and he may have assumed the river was a tributary of the Missouri. The name “Blue Kittentails” likely came from a cat owner with a good imagination.

The plant grows in a cluster of several stems about six to ten inches tall. Each stem is topped with a cone-shaped cluster of blue cup-shaped flowers. Each flower has four petals, with one petal longer than the others, and with only two stamens. The leaves arise from the base of the stems, with leaf blades about two inches long and somewhat heart-shaped in outline. The leaf edges have coarse, uneven teeth.

I could find no source indicating this plant has been used for any purpose.

Where to find: One is most likely to see this plant about the end of June around middle elevations in open areas in the woods.



Photo by Bruce Barnes

Blue Kittentails, *Synthyris missurica*

Simplifying game regulations topic of July public meetings

East Oregonian

SALEM — The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife announced Pendleton and Heppner are in the mix for public meetings in July about the 2019 big game hunting regulations.

The state agency is holding the meetings to discuss simplifying big game hunting regulations for the 2019 season (details available online) take public comment on the regulations and provide the public with the opportunity ask questions of district wildlife biologists.

The Pendleton meeting is July 10 from 4-7 p.m. at the ODFW office, 73471 Mytinger Lane, Pendleton, and the Heppner meeting starts at 6 p.m. at the Heppner ODFW office, 54173 Highway 74, Heppner. The La Grande meeting also is on July 11 from 6-9 p.m. at the La Grande City Library Community Room, 2006 Fourth St., La Grande.

The agency is holding 19 meetings in all from July 2 in Seaside to July 19 in the Dalles.

Michelle Dennehy, ODFW spokesperson, said the agency hosts the meetings every year as a way to hear from the public on regulations. She also said many of the meetings coincide with chapter meetings of local sportsman’s groups.

Tag numbers for 2019 will be another meeting topic. The numbers should be very similar to 2018 numbers.

“Big game over-winter survival was good this year due to the mild winter,” according to the agency, but herds in some areas continue to recover from the severe 2016-17 winter.

The public also can email comments to odfw.commission@state.or.us. The state Fish and Wildlife Commission will adopt the 2019 big game hunting regulations when it meets Sept. 15 in Bandon.