Feeding Foxes is Risky to All Involved

The good news is that the Catalina Island fox population is on the rise. The bad news is that, with more foxes around, there’s also more temptation to reach out and pet or feed these incredibly cute wild creatures. Bad idea.

Interaction with foxes, no matter how well-intentioned, has resulted in human injury and could be deadly for foxes.

Many people have noticed more foxes around town. Recall that an epidemic, most likely canine distemper, swept through Catalina’s fox population in 1999 leaving only about 100 foxes—approximately 25 of them on Catalina’s East End. Today, their numbers are estimated at near 800 Island-wide. As the fox population continues to recover, animals are dispersing into new areas that for 10 years have been nearly devoid of foxes.

Enter, three foxes that regularly lounge on the fairway at the golf course. This resourceful trio is always looking for free hand-outs, and often, get them.

Earlier this month, a woman near the Sand Trap restaurant got an up close and personal look at one of these moochers as she attempted to feed it a piece of lettuce. The feisty little fox returned
the favor by biting her hand!

While this was not the first report of someone feeding a fox near the golf course, it was the first time someone had reported being bitten.

Feeding foxes, or any wild animal, can be “extremely harmful” for several reasons, according to Julie King, Senior Wildlife Biologist for the Conservancy, who, with Wildlife Biologist Calvin Duncan, monitors the fox population.

“Wildlife that is fed by people become less experienced at foraging for their natural food and may become dependent on handouts that are not a part of their natural diets. This is especially true in juvenile animals that have not yet developed their own foraging skills, and have little ability to fend for themselves once handouts cease,” she said.

If that’s not bad enough, consider:

• Processed human foods don’t provide appropriate nutrition for wildlife and contain additives that can cause serious health problems, or even death.
• Feeding foxes can alter their natural behavior; the animal may lose its fear of humans, and by association, its fear of pets and even vehicles. Being hit by vehicles is currently is the leading cause of mortality in Catalina Island foxes, and several foxes have also been killed by unleashed dogs.
• Foxes, like all wild animals, may carry diseases and parasites that have the potential to be spread to people and their pets. While the Conservancy actively vaccinates approximately 80 percent of the wild fox population against both canine distemper and rabies, foxes may also carry diseases such as parvovirus, coronavirus, and internal parasites like tapeworms that can be transferred to domestic dogs even without direct contact. This makes keeping dogs leashed and picking up their waste important for both dog and fox.
• Intentionally feeding foxes can lead to animals that are unnaturally bold or develop aggressive behavior. This type of behavior results in conflicts between wildlife and humans and can lead to the death of the animal.
“When a person is bitten, the Center for Disease control could require that the fox be euthanized — an outcome that I’m sure no one would want,” notes King.

Besides being dangerous for folks and foxes, feeding a Catalina Island fox — a Federally Endangered Species — is actually illegal. The office of Special Agent Ed Newcomer of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is responsible for enforcing the criminal provisions of the Endangered Species Act.

“Catalina is so fortunate to have an endangered species like the Island fox that is recovering from near extinction,” Newcomer continued. “This provides an opportunity for both residents and visitors to see them and appreciate them. It is so important that everyone —visitors, residents and businesses —don’t create situations where they may run afoul of the law.”

Newcomer explained that the Act gives broad protection to Endangered species, and harassment is prohibited. “Harassment is defined by interfering with an animal’s natural behavior which includes feeding them,” he noted.

And the fine for harassing an Island fox? Up to $100,000 and one year in jail, according to Newcomer.

“It is particularly important for businesses in the community, such as the golf course where foxes have been seen and local restaurants where foxes have been fed by unsuspecting customers, to cooperate and spread the word,” he continued. “Any business that knowingly contributes to the harassment of a fox could also face criminal sanctions with fines of up to $200,000 per incident.”

Following the rules is especially important since moving the fairway fox trio would not be a best practice, and is not even an option in accordance with USFWS and California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) regulations.
“Island foxes are extremely territorial, and especially now as the breeding season has begun,” says King. “Moving a fox into an established territory would likely result in the injury or death of one or more individuals.”

So next time you’re tempted to toss a fox a fry or feed it a leaf of lettuce, consider the animal’s life in the wild and don’t rob them of their most important skill—their ability to survive on their own. But you can still enjoy them, safely and legally.

Suggests King, “Stopping to observe foxes in their natural habitat and taking photographs from a distance can be an exciting experience and a positive way to interact with wildlife.”

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