

NATURE'S

Grapevine

WASHINGTON CROSSING STATE PARK, NJ

Winter 2010

Red Foxes

By
Jennifer Schwing

A rustle is heard in the tall grass; a pair of bright, eye slits are visible in the night. Silently stalking a tiny mouse, listening to the faint, whispering breaths that no human could discern, a predator is hunting in your backyard. No, it isn't your neighbor's cat. It is a red fox, one of the most successful predators in the world, and quite at home in the fields, woods, marshes and human communities of New Jersey.

Red foxes, or *Vulpes vulpes*, are the most common species of fox in the world. Indeed, they're found all over the world, in an amazing range of habitats. They are native to most of North America, Europe, most of Asia, and Northern Africa. They were introduced by humans to Australia in the 19th century. What makes these beautiful canids (relatives to dogs) so successful? The answer is adaptability, a trait that humans share in being able to make a home just about anywhere.



Photo: Jenny Schwing

A young fox, a few months old, relaxes on the author's porch.



Almost everyone recognizes the red fox. We all know one when we see a picture. Thick, orange-red fur, long black legs, bushy white-tipped tail – all are hallmarks of this handsome animal. The fox is known for being particularly clever. The human culture of every one of the fox's homelands have stories featuring him. The fox is nocturnal, which means his preference to hunt at night leads to few sightings by humans. Adult red foxes range between 8 and 17 pounds and stand an average of 15 inches tall, about the size of a large house cat. Unlike other animals in the canine family (dogs, wolves, coyotes), red foxes have slit-shaped pupils, also like house cats. If you've ever had the opportunity to watch the behavior of a fox, it may remind you more of a feline than a canine.

Red foxes are known as carnivores, or hunters, but they can also be omnivores, which is one reason for their success. Omnivores, like humans, can eat almost any type of food that can be found. Foxes will hunt rodents, rabbits, songbirds and waterfowl, domesticated fowl like chickens, insects, and any other small animal in their territory. They will fish for crayfish, snails and frogs, and raid nests for eggs. They can't climb trees the way cats can, but given a short running start, have been known to run up the trunks of trees! Foxes are often scavengers, helping themselves to the remains of animals killed by something else. They will also enjoy nuts, seeds, berries and fruit! In addition, when food is plentiful, foxes are adept at storing food away to retrieve during times of scarcity.

Foxes are solitary animals, more like lone coyotes than pack animals like wolves. They will find each other when it is time to mate, and for a short time, an adult male and a female will live and hunt together. Before the female fox, or vixen, is ready to have her kits, the pair will search together for a suitable

(continued next page)



den or burrow to shelter the new family. They will usually find one that was previously used by another animal, such as a groundhog. She will enlarge it if necessary, or dig a new burrow if she must. Vixens will have between 5 and 13 kits, which will live on their mother's milk for around 4 weeks. Before they are weaned, they will be allowed out of their den under mom's watchful eye to play and explore the world close by. Sometimes the father fox, or dog fox will help to hunt for food and supply it to his new family. However, if the mother vixen is raising her family alone, she will tuck them safely inside her den before she ventures out to find food. Upon her return, she barks softly to her kits to call them outside, and out they come, tumbling around each other in their excitement to taste what mom has brought them. The kits are fully weaned by ten weeks, and are able at this point to catch small meals on their own. After a few months, they are ready to head off and find their own territory. Foxes will generally return to the same den year after year, unless something makes the burrow unsuitable.

The fox's ability to adapt to any set of conditions has also allowed it to find some unusual and sometimes inconvenient homes. Often, this means the backyards of suburban and urban areas inhabited by humans. Generally, foxes avoid humans, but human homes are attractive because they can offer an easy food supply and protection from larger predators. Foxes usually will not bother pets such as cats and dogs, but they have been known to prey on chickens in backyard coops. They will also help themselves to dog or cat food left on the porch for the family pet. A burrow dug under the shed provides a cozy, safe home. Healthy foxes pose no danger to humans. They can be vectors for contagious diseases such as rabies, mange and distemper. Often, the sight of a fox close to a human home can cause anxiety or concern, but for the most part, it shouldn't be feared. However, a fox can be frightened away by loud noises when sighted, and eventually will avoid a backyard. Unfortunately, sometimes the first time a fox might be sighted in your yard is only after a vixen has set up a nursery nearby! This is what happened in my case. In early spring, I caught sight of a gorgeous healthy adult red fox trotting along the edge of the woods at the back of my yard as I was washing dishes at the sink. There was no apparent reason for her to be there; we have no outdoor pets, no bird feeders, and keep the garbage locked up. But as I watched, I found what brought her near. She trotted to our shed, sat down, and barked. Immediately, eight dark gray fluffy kits emerged from under our shed started wrestling at her feet. She sniffed each one in turn, then settled down to nurse them all as I watched. It was a beautiful sight, and I felt honored to see it. For the next few weeks, my family and I enjoyed watching the big family grow and play and turn from that dark gray to a beautiful deep rust red. As the spring warmed, I found I could step out onto the deck to take a few pictures before mama fox ushered the kits back into the safety of their burrow.

After a month or two, the litter began exploring all over our yard, and started to hunt on their own. We rarely saw them during the day anymore, but our delight at having them for neighbors turned to annoyance as they used our driveway as a



Photo: Jenny Schwing

The author photographed this vixen with her young family of only a few weeks in her yard last summer.

litter box. We were sure that very soon they would move on and find new territories. We were right, for the most part. Imagine our surprise when we began to spot three of the almost-grown kits lounging on our front deck, a couple of feet from the front door! I began to worry, then, when the kits showed little fear when I tried to scare them off. Apparently their mama forgot to teach them to be wary of humans. After a few more weeks, our little rascals finally left us. I can be sure that without taking the proper precautions, mama or one of her kits will return to enjoy the comfort of our shed once again in the spring. For now, I'll toss a generous handful of mothballs in the hole. They will be smelly to the foxes, without being poisonous. When I'm sure that there are no residents, I'll fill the hole with gravel. If our neighbors return, I'll disturb the area in front of the den regularly, until the mother decides to move her brood to a backup den.

It's almost impossible to prevent a fox from hunting in your backyard. Most times, you won't even know that one is there. But steps can be taken to be sure a fox family doesn't interfere with yours. Don't leave pet food outside (this will also discourage skunks, raccoons and other "nuisance" wildlife), keep garbage secure, and if you do see a fox nearby, don't feed it! Feeding wild mammals is dangerous for both humans and the animals. It undermines their ability to find food for themselves, and the food people might offer can not come close to the nutrition of the foxes' natural food sources.

There is one benefit that we found when hosting our red-coated family: during the time the foxes lived in our yard, we never found a single mouse in our basement!

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Jennifer Schwing studied biology at Trenton State College and library science at Rutgers. She works as an information analyst at a large pharmaceutical firm. She has always enjoyed a relationship with nature, presenting her mother with the first frog and insect specimens, collected at age 3. Jennifer currently resides in Pennsylvania with her husband and three-yr. old son who likes carnivores.

Volunteer Notes

Gene Ramsey, Pennington, of the **Amateur Astronomers Association of Princeton** conducted two very interesting sessions of solar observing in September. It is noteworthy that few or no sunspots have been visible for the last few years of solar observing here at the Nature Center. Some experts believe that the lack of sunspots indicates changes on the sun that might be impacting the Earth's climate.

Jim Wade, Princeton, gave a fine presentation on Native Americans in November.

Bill Schindler, Shrewsbury, organized a very exciting weekend of primitive technologies in October. Mr. Schindler brought in a variety of volunteers to demonstrate skills and disciplines such as flintknapping, archaeology, primitive pot firing, wild edibles, primitive weapons production and use, fire building and others. We would like to thank all the volunteers that participated and who are too numerous to list here. A special shout-out goes to **Bill Schindler Jr.** who came up from Maryland with his family and some students from Washington College to help out with the event.

Nettie Rekowski, Ewing, and **Ellen Coleman**, Ewing both came out to staff the Nature Center during programs.

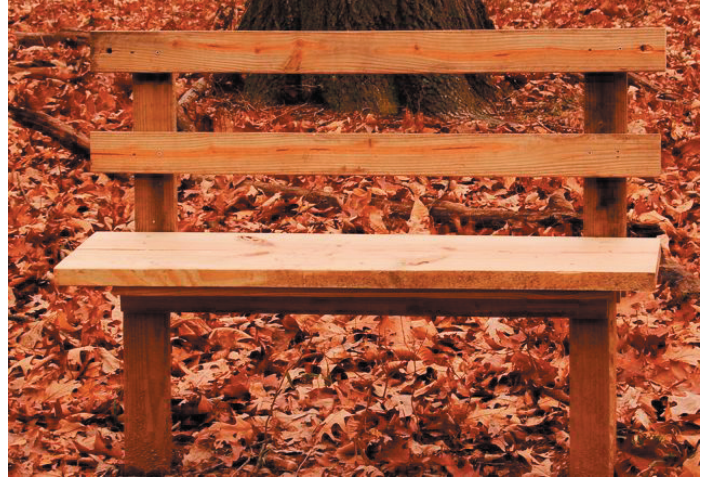
Around the Park

☼ School, scout, and college groups from Lawrenceville, Ewing, Merchantsville, Flemington, Parsippany and Montgomery Twp.



Came out to the Nature Center this past autumn to participate in a variety of outdoor education and interpretive activities.

☼ **Nik Hansson**, Pennington, of **Scout Troop # 41** completed his Eagle project here in WCSP this past summer. Nik replaced several aging wayside benches with new benches that he and volunteers from his scout troop constructed. The benches are all located along the Nature Center walking trails and are presently available for visitor use.



One of several new wayside benches

Many Nature Center Visitors have been wondering what the new, rather odd-looking structure adjacent the facility's parking area is. This is also part of Nik's Eagle project. It is a passive solar dryer designed to circulate warm air from the bottom of an inclined Plexiglas panel through the unit and out the top. It is being used to dry plants and other materials for use in craft programs as well as a prop to demonstrate the use of passive solar energy. Thank you Nik Hansson and scouts from Troop 41!



Solar Dryer

Goat Hill Overlook

The NJ Division of Parks and Forestry has acquired a beautiful new property just a few miles north of WCSP. "Goat Hill Overlook" (as it is now being called) is a 213 acre tract that was purchased from a private land owner with Green Acres funds earlier in the year. The new property sits on a bluff overlooking the Delaware River and boasts commanding views of the Delaware Valley including portions of Lambertville, New Hope and areas north and west into Bucks County, PA. The tract also contains extensive hardwood and mixed oak forests, open fields, numerous rock outcrops at least two former diabase quarries and hiking trails. Tradition states that General George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette had lunch together on the overlook as they contemplated strategy during the American Revolution. The property is now open for the public's enjoyment subject to State Park rules and regulations. Goat Hill Overlook is under the management jurisdiction of Washington Crossing State Park. Watch upcoming editions of *Nature's Grapevine* as well as the local newspapers for announcements of guided hikes to be scheduled on the property in the near future.

How to get there: Travel north from WCSP on NJ Rt. 29 (River Road) for 4.4 miles. Turn right onto Valley Rd. and proceed 0.6 miles to Goat Hill Rd. Turn left onto Goat Hill and proceed 1.3 miles to George Washington Rd. Turn left onto George Washington Rd. and proceed 0.2 miles looking for an open gate straight ahead at a point where George Washington Rd. makes a sharp bend to the right. Drive through the gate onto an un-named gravel road and continue up the gravel road to a small parking area on the left. After parking, continue on foot on the gravel road around a second (locked) set of gates and follow the road as it winds its way to the overlook area on the top of the hill. Additional trails will be observable to access other portions of the property on the left side of the road. The parking area's GPS coordinates are N 40° 21.182' W 74° 56.243'.



A view up the Delaware Valley from Goat Hill Overlook

FAMILY SCAVERGER HUNT WINNERS

November 22, 2009



The Tellier Family, Titusville; the Majkowski Family, Pennington; the Bernstein Family, Pennington (not shown)

This newsletter is available free of charge electronically . It can be downloaded at the web address below. Requests to be included on the emailing list may be made by contacting the Nature Center.

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Winter Programs at the Nature Center

The following is a list of activities being offered through the Nature Center at Washington Crossing State Park in Titusville, New Jersey. All programs are offered free of charge. Some will require advanced registration as indicated below. All program registrations will be taken in real time. No emails please. Attendance is always limited and is available on a first-come, first-served basis. Programs will commence at the Nature Center unless otherwise indicated. An adult must accompany all children.. In the event of inclement weather some programs might be canceled. It is always advisable to call ahead before coming out. These events are intended for families and individuals only. Programs for scouts, schools and other groups are scheduled separately by special arrangement. Phone : (609) 737-0609

FAMILY NATURE WALK (all ages) Sunday Jan. 3, 1:30 - 2:30 p.m. Join us for an informal naturalist-guided trail walk.

NATURE VIDEO Sunday Jan. 10, 1:30 p.m. **The Poles.** The advance and retreat of polar ice is the real challenge to life. In Antarctica all animals flee except the emperor penguin. Meanwhile, in the Arctic, the polar bear must swim long distances to obtain food. Learn how wildlife survives in some of the most challenging places on the planet.

NATURE VIDEO Sunday Jan. 17, 1:30 p.m. **Fresh Water Environments.** Follow rivers as they drop from their highland sources. This video documents the unique wildlife found within the Earth's fresh water habitats.. The world's waterfalls, canyons, lakes, wetlands and rivers provide mystery, excitement and awe-inspiring sights.

NATURE / HISTORY VIDEOS Saturday Jan. 23 12:45 p.m. **Down Jersey** explores the environment, history, and culture of Salem, Cumberland and western Cape May counties. Profiling individuals whose lives reflect the region, the program examines how residents of the area have managed to keep their traditional work, their cultural heritage, and their environmental resources intact after so many years. The **Highlands Rediscovered** focuses on the rich natural history and the water resources in northern New Jersey.

BALDPATE MOUNTAIN HIKE (pre-teen – adult) Sunday Jan. 24, 1:30 – 4:00 p.m. We will take the red trail from its trailhead on Church Rd. to the top of the hill. Meet at the parking lot by Neiderer's Pond (Church Rd). Advanced registration required. Bring a water bottle and wear hiking shoes.

NATURE VIDEO Sunday Jan. 31, 1:30 p.m. **Jungles.** These forests are among the world's most productive ecosystems due to their long growing season and little seasonality. This video will explore the jungle's layers from forest floor through the canopy.

THE PALEO AND ARCHAIC INDIANS OF NEW JERSEY Saturday Feb. 6, 1:00 p.m. **Jim Wade**, former archivist and researcher with the N.J. State Museum and **Jim Silk**, regional reconstructive lithic technologist, will take participants on a journey back to the time of the end of the last ice age when the earliest Native American people entered what is now New Jersey. Discover how these Paleo-Indians lived and survived in an arctic landscape filled with strange prehistoric fur-covered animals, like the woolly mammoth, great elk and musk oxen. Learn how these earliest people adapted to their harsh environment and hunted with specialized Clovis spearpoints. See how these prehistoric hunters opened the way for new bands of Archaic peoples who followed with new innovative stone tools and lifestyles. The program will include a slide presentation and Native American artifacts will be displayed.

NATURE VIDEO Sunday Feb. 7, 1:30 p.m. **Seasonal Forests** This video catalogues forests from the northern evergreens to the dry areas of the tropics These forests harbor the world's oldest, tallest and largest organisms along with an amazing variety of wildlife.

NATURE VIDEOS Sunday Feb. 14, 1:30 p.m. **Turning the Tide** This half-hour documentary showcases the hidden beauty of the tidal areas in and around the Hackensack Meadowlands of northern New Jersey and the Hamilton-Trenton Marsh just south of the state capital of Trenton. **Along the Delaware** This video takes the viewer on a trip down the length of the Delaware River from its source near Narrowsburg, NY to its mouth at Cape May and presents the various fish, shellfish and other resources that can be harvested along the way.

MAPLE SUGARING (All Ages) Saturday Feb. 20, 1:00 – 2:30 p.m. This event is a participatory demonstration in the procedures of home maple sugar production. Advanced registration required after 1/19.

Nature Center programs continued

MAPLE SUGARING (All Ages) Saturday March 6, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m. This event is a participatory demonstration in the procedures of home maple sugar production. Advanced registration required after 2/9.

MAPLE SUGARING (All Ages) Sunday March 7, 1:30 – 3:00 p.m. This event is a participatory demonstration in the procedures of home maple sugar production. Advanced registration required after 2/9.

MAPLE SUGARING (All Ages) Sunday March 14, 1:30 – 3:00 p.m. This event is a participatory demonstration in the procedures of home maple sugar production. Advanced registration required after 2/16.

WINTER BIRDS OF THE PARK (All Ages) Sunday March 21, 1:30 - 3:30 p.m. Come join veteran birder **Lou Beck** of *Washington Crossing Audubon* as we walk the trails in search of a variety of winter bird species and perhaps some early spring migrants. Advanced registration required after 2/17. Free.

EARLY SPRING TWILIGHT HIKE (Adult) Thursday March 25, 7:15 p.m. We will search the park's remote northern sections for early spring twilight and nocturnal phenomena such as woodcocks in courtship, spring peepers and other breeding amphibians, owls, etc. Advanced registration required, Meet at the parking lot by Neiderer's Pond (Church Rd). Wear boots and bring a flashlight. Advanced registration required after 2/23.

Winter Programs at the Visitor Center Museum

HISTORY VIDEO Saturday, Jan. 9, 2:00 p.m. *Washington's Weather*. The Weather Channel's series "When Weather Changed History" features George Washington and how weather played a pivotal role in his battles during the American Revolution.

HISTORY VIDEO Saturday, Jan. 16, 2:00 p.m. *John Paul Jones: Captain of the High Seas*. This 50-minute video recounts the life of America's first naval hero.

HISTORY VIDEO Saturday, Jan. 23, 2:00 p.m. *Paul Revere: The Midnight Rider*. This 50-minute video recounts the life of the patriot Paul Revere.

HISTORY VIDEO Saturday, Jan. 30, 2:00 p.m. *Thomas Jefferson: Philosopher of Freedom*. A 50-minute video biography of Thomas Jefferson: statesman, scientist, architect and President.

HISTORY VIDEO Saturday, Feb. 6, 2:00 p.m. *Benjamin Franklin: Citizen of the World*. A 50-minute video biography of America's great diplomat: Benjamin Franklin.

HISTORY VIDEO Saturday, Feb. 13, 2:00 p.m. *Benedict Arnold: Triumph and Treason*. This 50-minute video describes the life of this enigmatic man.

HISTORY VIDEO Saturday, Feb. 20, 2:00 p.m. *George Washington: Founding Father*. A 50-minute video biography of our Nation's Founding Father: George Washington.

HISTORY VIDEO Saturday, Feb. 27, 2:00 p.m. *Discover New Jersey: Revolutionary Travels*. A 30-minute video takes you on a tour of several New Jersey historic sites.

MUSKET FIRING DEMONSTRATION. Saturday, March 27, 2:00 p.m. Join a Park Historian for an interpretive talk about some of the weapons used during the American Revolution and their use during the Battle of Trenton. Included will be a musket firing demonstration.

Winter Programs at the Johnson Ferry House

WINTER FOODWAYS CLASS Saturday, Jan. 9, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Special theme to be announced. **Mercy Ingraham** is our instructor. Advanced registration is a must @ 609-737-2515.

CHOCOLATE WORKSHOP Saturday, Feb. 6, 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. "From Bean to Beverage" **Susan McLellan Plaisted** is our instructor. Call 215-219-9542 to register.

GEORGE WASHINGTON'S BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION Sunday, Feb. 21, 1:00 to 4 :00 p.m. Educational and domestic activity of the 18th century will be continuous. No entrance fee. Donations are appreciated to cover refreshments.

