PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release | July 28, 2025
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Media link to photos:
Red Fox Photos
password: redfox
Credit: Cascades Carnivore Monitoring Program

Carnivore monitoring collaboration co-led by zoo documents rare red fox in North Cascades
Today is World Nature Conservation Day

SEATTLE—A carnivore in the North Cascades has lived up to its reputation—*crafty as a fox.* During a recent visit to a high-elevation camera station (~6,500 feet) in the North Cascades, Woodland Park Zoo field biologists discovered photos of a red fox that stopped by in early March.

Given the station's remote mountainous location, scientists are hopeful that this rare visitor was a native Cascade red fox (*Vulpes vulpes cascadensis*), a subspecies of red fox that is currently listed as Endangered in Washington state. Because Cascade red foxes are not visually distinctive from non-native red foxes, genetic information is required to determine if a fox is a Cascade red fox.

The field biologists, Robert Long, PhD, and Paula MacKay, deployed the cameras last summer as part of their leadership role with the Cascades Carnivore Monitoring Program, a highly collaborative, long-term monitoring program for wolverines, Canada lynx and other carnivores of conservation concern.

According to Long, there is no evidence of non-native red foxes in the vicinity. "The cameras at the survey station captured dozens of photos of a beautiful red fox with a bushy tail. We're encouraged by the fact that the station is located in a cold, high-elevation environment, which is natural habitat for Cascade red foxes," said Long, Director of Woodland Park Zoo's Living Northwest Program. "They are adapted to using subalpine meadows, parkland, upper montane forests and alpine areas to meet their life needs, so we are very hopeful this is indeed a Cascade red fox."

In addition to the red fox, the camera station documented a rare fisher. Fishers are a member of the mustelid (weasel) family and were recently reintroduced to the North Cascades after succumbing to over-trapping and habitat loss by the mid-1900s.

Cascade red foxes are endemic to Washington and historically occurred in the Cascade Range of Washington and southern British Columbia. Today, only a small population survives and is thought to be limited to the Washington Cascades south of the I-90 corridor. In 2018, a single Cascade red fox was genetically confirmed north of I-90 near Steven's Pass, but no resident population has been documented in the North Cascades.

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has identified the Cascade red fox as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need and is conducting research to learn more about the population's distribution. Because of the fox's precarious status,

WDFW wants to determine if and where Cascade red foxes occur in the North Cascades. Threats to the Cascade red fox population include its small population size and a possible lack of genetic diversity, as well as potential habitat loss and fragmentation due to climate change, competition with and predation and/or disease transmission by coyotes moving into high elevations, and hybridization with and other impacts from non-native red foxes.

The Cascades Carnivore Monitoring Program will continue to operate survey stations in the area of the fox detection, and field crews will be searching for fox scat as a potential source of genetic material to hopefully confirm whether this is, indeed, a Cascade red fox. Long and MacKay are also in touch with WDFW and other researchers to support further action steps.

Survey stations that make this field research possible consist of scent dispensers paired with motion-activated cameras known as camera traps; the stations allow researchers to detect and monitor elusive species of conservation focus. Woodland Park Zoo first co-created the scent dispensers in 2015 in partnership with Microsoft Research and Idaho Fish and Game. The dispensers are programmed to disburse a small amount of liquid lure every day, attracting animals that happen to be wandering through the area. “Prior to developing these innovative scent dispensers, the scents would naturally fade within a few weeks. However, rebaiting remote sites every two to four weeks to lure animals to the cameras is virtually impossible during winter when deep snow and dangerous avalanche conditions make backcountry terrain dangerous or impossible to access,” said Long. Because of the zoo’s automated scent dispensers, camera stations are able to survey wildlife throughout the harsh winters in the Cascades.

Some of the rare animals recently caught on research cameras paired with scent dispensers include wolverines, Canada lynx, gray wolves, and fishers in the Cascades, and Pacific martens on the Olympic Peninsula.

Woodland Park Zoo co-initiated the Cascades Carnivore Monitoring Program with research biologists at Washington State University as a highly collaborative, long-term monitoring program for wolverines and Canada lynx, using wildlife cameras in mountainous terrain. The program is powered by a broad diversity of partners including Tribes, agencies, nonprofits, and academic institutions who collectively began conducting field work in 2024. To learn more, visit: www.zoo.org/carnivoremonitoring

About Cascade red foxes

- Cascade red foxes are one of three subspecies of red fox that occupy montane habitats in western North America.
- Little is known about this rare subspecies.
- They have thick coats that can range in color from deep red to silver/black and have a white-tipped tail.
- These carnivores eat small and mid-sized mammals, insects, fruits and birds found in the mountains.
- They occur at low abundance in Mount Rainier National Park and elsewhere in Washington’s South Cascades. For more information: https://wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/species/vulpes-vulpes-cascadensis

World Nature Conservation Day is a reminder that it is everyone’s obligation to preserve and protect the natural world for today’s generations and generations to come. The theme for World Nature Conservation Day 2025 emphasizes the urgent need for protecting biodiversity, restoring degraded ecosystems, and promoting global cooperation to ensure a sustainable future. The global initiative highlights responsible resource use and collective action for conserving Earth’s natural heritage.

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