

Fox Kits Orphaned by Wildlife Services

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In June, 2008 the Chintimini Wildlife Center in Corvallis, OR received a call from the son of a property owner near Lebanon, OR informing them that his father had foxes killed on his property because they were killing some of his "free-range" chickens and ducks. The domestic fowl was not penned but rather roaming loose through dilapidated outbuildings, junked cars and farm equipment. The property owner requested that the local USDA Wildlife Services' trapper kill the foxes. According to the property owner's son, one adult male and three female foxes were strangled with neck snares set by Wildlife Services. Death by neck snare is always slow and brutally inhumane as they kill through slow suffocation.

After these four adult animals were killed, the property owner heard or saw young foxes. A den was located with an unknown number of kits described as "larger." These kits were killed as well. How many and how they were killed was not disclosed.

After the kits were destroyed the property owner's son realized there were other dens in the area with still more kits. He set a live trap and started catching small kits and taking them to the Chintimini Wildlife Center. After the first kits were brought in, Chintimini staff asked if they could retrieve any remaining kits from the dens so that the animals would be rescued sooner thereby increasing their chances of survival. Chintimini staff visited the site and identified at least three possible den sites but, citing liability issues, the property owner would not allow anyone to climb into the dens to retrieve the kits at that time.

Chintimini's Executive Director, Jeff Picton, contacted the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) to find out whether the property owner had acquired the necessary permits to trap animals. ODFW had no record of anyone filing for such a permit. They, in turn, contacted the Oregon State Police, who visited the site and found that a Wildlife Services' trapper had trapped the foxes. Technically these killings were legal as Wildlife Services does not require a State of Oregon permit to kill predatory animals such as foxes. At this point Chintimini Wildlife Center obtained a permit from ODFW to catch and remove the remaining kits from the dens under ODFW authority. Jeff climbed into three different den sites, but found no kits despite observing a lot of sign, including worn paths and an abundance of small bones. The habitat was excellent for foxes; the area consisted of several large downed trees covered with blackberries as well as numerous tumbledown outbuildings. The foxes had dug dens under the root masses of the downed trees and had an extensive series of paths through the blackberries that provided them with cover.

Following Chintimini's visit to the property, the property owner's son continued to set a live trap for another week or so and caught nine tiny kits. Chintimini staff fear that other kits may have perished. The kits that were live-trapped are all doing well and, due to subsequent media coverage, several individuals have contacted Chintimini who are interested in providing release sites for the foxes.

Under ideal conditions, fox kits, coyote and wolf pups all suffer high mortality with perhaps only one-quarter surviving a full year. Skilled as the Chintimini staff is, their rehabilitation efforts simply cannot match the survival skills these young animals would have learned from their

parents. Foxes, like coyotes and wolves, are monogamous and both the male and female feed and nurture the young. Professional wildlife rehabilitators are the first to acknowledge that they are no substitute for rearing by their natural parents. Once the kits are released they are less likely to survive than kits that did not lose their parents.

When Wildlife Services responds to complaints such as this one, they use lethal methods 100 percent of the time. They are not required, and do not choose, to educate people about how they can limit loss of domestic animals by using sound husbandry practices. As a consequence this scenario may be repeated next year. In this case the den sites could have been rendered undesirable to foxes simply by removing the blackberries that covered them. This would have opened up the area so that it no longer provided the cover the foxes needed in order to move around and raise their young. As things now stand, there is no incentive for the individual property owner to practice good animal husbandry.

Ironically, the killing of these foxes means that the ecosystem is deprived of a natural check on prey species including rats, mice, gophers, and rabbits that are often more detrimental to agriculture than the predators themselves.

Each year the USDA Wildlife Services Program brutally kills over 100,000 native predators including wolves, coyotes, foxes, cougars, bobcats, bears and other species by using leg-hold and body-gripping traps, snares, poisons, aerial gunning, and denning (digging coyote pups out of their dens and smashing them with shovels). We fund this cruel and unnecessary slaughter through our federal taxes. Continuing to spend millions of tax dollars each year for "Wildlife Services" to kill native wildlife begs the question "Why?"

For more information on the USDA Wildlife Services Program visit the Predator Defense website at <http://www.predatordefense.org/USDA.htm>.