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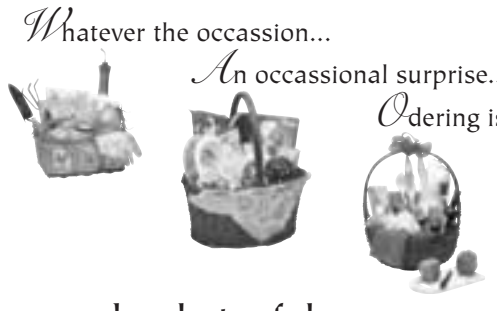

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Coyotes subject of science study on island

By Adrienne Downing

Foxy, a coyote that was trapped this week at Beavertail.

Photo by Adrienne Downing

There is a tiny girl on the island with a fancy new necklace. Foxy, the latest coyote to be trapped and collared by Narragansett Bay Coyote Study scientists, was caught in a trap at a Beavertail property on Sept. 19.

"We named her Foxy because her feet were so small they looked like foxes feet," Dr. Numi Mitchell, lead scientist with the NBCS said. "She had been around the trap for a few days before she got caught in it, and we thought by the footprints she was leaving that we were dealing with a red fox."

At 27-pounds and 114 centimeters, she was so small that the team thought she was a pup until they saw her teeth and realized she was full-grown.

Mitchell visually inspects each of the set NBCS traps every morning, and must quickly notify her team if a coyote is caught so they can collar the animal and release it as soon as possible.

"Coyotes are most active at night, so I come out first thing in the morning to check the traps so they don't have to spend too much time in them," Mitchell said.

Foxy was laying quietly in the grass when the team arrived, but she was not very interested in having her picture taken. As the photographers and team approached, her eyes flashed brightly and she let out a warning growl.

Mitchell and her team worked quickly to net and anesthetize her so she would not be frightened.

Dr. Ralph Pratt, the chief veteranarian for NBCS, monitored her until he was sure she was in a deep enough sleep not to harm herself or the team. He also put a small muzzle over her mouth to prevent any injuries should she awaken suddenly.

"Anesthesia can sometimes be unpredictable, so we want to have something on her mouth. If she were to bite someone, we would have to put her to sleep and send her to the state lab and that is not good for anyone," Pratt said.

Pratt also carries a medication to quickly reverse the anesthesia should there be a problem with the coyote.

"We don't ever want to release a half-sedated coyote into the wild because they may harm themselves. We want to make sure they are fully alert before we let them go," he said.

After the team took her measurements and photographs, Pratt looked her over and Mitchell put the GPS collar in place.

"This will fall off on its own after a year, so we won't ever have to bother her again," Mitchell said.

The NBCS is currently tracking, or has tracked, 20 different coyotes to study their resource use, with an emphasis on how to manage the coyote population on the island.

"Coyotes will control their own numbers based on the resources available to them. Currently they are highly subsidized by humans, so their numbers are high," Mitchell explained. "They are troublesome because they are trained by people to look to people for food."

Coyotes will generally eat whatever is available to them, so if less food is made available to them they could be helpful in controlling nuisance populations on the island, such as mice, deer and woodchucks.

The tracking team closely field tracks the coyotes in the days after their release to ensure they are doing well.

Five days after her capture, Foxy was tracked to a wooded area off Blueberry Lane.

"This behavior is consistent with what we thought about her. We believe she is the alpha female of the Beavertail pack, which also travels in the Highland Drive, Blueberry Lane area," Mitchell said. "This is so exciting because she is going to really give us a lot of information about that pack."

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