

Sierra Nevada red foxes are more common than once thought

September 26 2011, By Louis Sahagun

At least half a dozen Sierra Nevada red foxes, a species once believed to have been nearly wiped out in the 1920s, roam the high country wilderness south of Yosemite, U.S. Forest Service biologists said Thursday.

Until last year, [biologists](#) believed the only known population of *Vulpes vulpes necator* consisted of about 20 animals clinging to survival in the Lassen Peak region, about 150 miles to the north.

Not anymore.

Several red foxes have been sighted in recent months just west of Bridgeport, Calif., and [DNA analyses](#) of scat collected in the area indicates they may be related, Forest Service biologist Sherri Lisius said. In addition, an adult [red fox](#) was struck and killed by a vehicle in January about 16 miles northwest of Bridgeport.

"We know there are six, which is still ridiculously rare," Lisius said. "We are expanding our studies of this animal, the rarest [carnivore](#) in the state, in hopes of finding more. It would be sad to lose this special creature just after rediscovering it."

Federal and state wildlife technicians have installed motion-sensitive cameras throughout the region, and followed tracks left the snow in hopes of finding a den with pups.

The [Sierra Nevada](#) red fox lives at high elevations, eating [small mammals](#) and birds. It has a reddish head, back and sides; black backs of the ears; black "socks" on its feet; and a white-tipped tail.

University of California, Davis biologist Jocelyn Akins, who spent most of last winter collecting red fox scat and following fox tracks for miles in the snow, said, "It is important to determine whether there is a stable population in the area."

"If so, the big question is this: Should there be restrictions on recreational skiing and snowmobiles up there?" she asked rhetorically. "A comprehensive population assessment will take a few years to complete."

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