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## Officials: Neary Lagoon red fox to be left alone

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*Animal Welfare*  
SANTA CRUZ — The hunt has been called off for the injured Neary Lagoon fox.

Wildlife officials said Tuesday that hunters will not shoot or set traps for the increasingly well-known fox as long as it doesn't become aggressive toward anyone.

And the animal is not as likely to offend again if people quit feeding it, said Jim Lang, director of the Santa Cruz City Parks and Recreation Department. He said it was human hospitality that jeopardized the fox in the first place.

Meanwhile, Neary Lagoon Park, where the fox makes its home, has been reopened now that the foxhunt is over.

State Fish and Game wildlife officials suspended the death sentence after determining the fox probably is not rabid, but has become overly comfortable with people because it has been fed. They

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called it quits after trying for a week to get the animal but getting outfoxed, state Fish and Game Lt. Dennis Baldwin said.

But the fox is still on probation. It's OK if he's "bold," but not "aggressive," Baldwin said.

"I'm going to allow that animal to be a wild animal as long as it is doing what a wild animal should do," Baldwin said. "The cutoff point is when someone tells me something that makes it clear he's in a predator mode or has acted aggressively toward someone."

U.S. Wildlife Service hunters set traps and took a shot at the fox last week after he was declared a threat to human safety.

Baldwin said the hunters were pretty sure the shot missed. But residents later saw the fox limping with a hurt leg, and were afraid it had been wounded and left to die.

The hunters haven't able to find the fox since and the traps have been pulled,

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# Fox

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Baldwin said.

Westside resident Nancy Pearson said she saw a fox Monday evening that she thinks is the Neary Lagoon fox. It was limping, but not badly, she said.

Mark Woodward, while delivering the Sentinel about 5 a.m. Tuesday, saw it again in the same area. Woodward said he followed the injured fox for about six blocks before losing sight.

"He was obviously in a lot of distress. He couldn't go faster than a walk," Woodward said.

The saga of the fox began in mid-January when Santa Cruz parks maintenance worker Patti Calhoun was cleaning the restroom at Neary Lagoon Park. The fox came in, and when she attempted to shoo it away, the fox growled at her and bared its teeth.

City officials closed the park and called the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. The SPCA set traps but instead caught possums, cats and raccoons.

The city also put out a "fox alert" in the neighborhood, asking residents to call 911 if they spotted the fox.

Then they called state Fish and Game officials, who concluded from the information they were given that the fox was acting very unfox-like and might be rabid.

It had another strike against it — its color. It's a red fox, a non-native species that preys on protected snowy plovers and other sensitive species that live in Neary Lagoon, Baldwin said.

At the very least, the fox seemed to have adapted to urban life and to have lost its fear of humans, Baldwin said.

While foxes aren't known to attack people, the Neary Lagoon fox was unusually aggressive, he said. There were several reports of the fox being within four to five feet of people, and reports of pet rabbits and chickens being killed.

While officialdom has been criticized for overreacting, Baldwin defended his department's response. "What if it had been a child that it growled at?"

The fox — dubbed "Sir William of Neary" or "Wily Willy" by city employees — was also reportedly seen carrying around rabbits' heads, which was taken as further indication it had rabies.

Baldwin said wildlife officials had no choice but to try to kill the fox at that point. Because it is a non-native species, state regulations prohibit trapping and relocating it, he said.

"The only option we had is to kill the animal," Baldwin said.

Baldwin said that city parks officials and police were in agreement with the plan. Lang, who earlier said he hoped the fox would be relocated, said he didn't learn until later that the only option being considered was to kill the fox.

The hunters set between 20 to 25 padded leg-holds traps, used a predator call and took a shot at the fox and later used a dog to try to track it down.

But the fox disappeared.  
"We tried everything we have," Baldwin said, noting that several wildlife hunters spent a week looking for the fox.

Baldwin said there's no indication — blood or fur — that the fox was either hit or caught in a trap. Baldwin speculated it might have been scared off, at least temporarily. While searching for the fox, however, they discovered a gray fox living in the area, and speculate there may be another red fox, too.

Meanwhile, other information weighed in favor of the hunted fox. Neighborhood residents reported that the animal was frequently seen and while it was not afraid, it wasn't aggressive.

A Ben Lomond animal tracker discovered its den and found a stuffed animal of a rabbit's head inside, along with some tennis shoes. He speculated that people might have mistaken the toy for real rabbits.