

The Santa Cruz Island Fox

✿ Foxes have resided on the Channel Islands for over 10,000 years.

It is thought that they arrived by 'rafting' – traveling across the Santa Barbara Channel on tree roots washed by storms from the California mainland. The water level was much lower then, making the distance between the mainland and the island quite short.

✿ The unique island fox – found nowhere else on earth – is now in immediate danger of extinction.

In the 10,000 years of separation from the mainland, the island fox has become much smaller and weighs less than its distant relative, the gray fox. The island fox can be active during all parts of the day and night, hunting whenever food and prey are available. With no historic predators, it is quite playful and largely unafraid of animals or people. In fact, the native Chumash Indians may have even kept the friendly and gentle foxes as pets. It is this trait of innocence, however, that may have led to their peril.



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✿ Recent census data indicates an alarming drop in the fox population this past year.

Biologists, monitoring the fox for a number of years, had been observing a modest decline in its numbers with keen interest. However, this recent change is so dramatic that experts now estimate the Santa Cruz Island foxes to be at risk of going extinct in as little as one year, if action is not taken immediately.

✿ Santa Cruz Island is an ecosystem out of balance: A bizarre set of circumstances have conspired to bring a new predator to the island.

The abundant population of wild pigs has attracted golden eagles, newly established from the mainland, which also prey upon the unsuspecting foxes. The northern Channel Islands were historically dominated by bald eagles, which primarily prey upon fish and other marine life. Unfortunately, DDT in the ocean food chain eliminated bald eagles along the coast of California in the 1950's and 1960's. In recent years, golden eagles have discovered the opportunity presented by the absence of their domineering cousins, and made their way to the islands. Without bald eagles to defend the territory, more than a dozen golden eagles – which feed on predominately land animals – are now hunting on Santa Cruz Island. This new shift in eagle populations, from bald to golden, has placed enormous pressure on the island fox, threatening its very survival.

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 The Nature Conservancy and the National Park Service are taking the necessary steps to save the Santa Cruz Island fox.

The capture and removal of the golden eagles is already underway, but because the root problem is the presence of feral pigs, efforts are being made to ultimately eliminate them from the island ecosystem. In coming years, broad based public support will be necessary to ensure the success of this challenging and difficult task if the tide of island fox extinction is to be reversed.

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