



With just one more sighting of the elusive creatures, 2010 will be the

Year of the Red Fox



Two recent encounters with red foxes equal the number of run-ins with the little creatures in many years of nature watching.

DON DAVIS
OUTDOORS



Until this spring I can recall seeing a red fox twice in the past many years.

One ran across the road in front of my pickup once near Union, Ore.

Another time, one stood out in a pasture as I drove between Baker City and Haines, Ore.

So, in April I thoroughly enjoyed the several hours that I spent observing a family of red foxes in a Walla Walla-area pasture.

I photographed an adult and four cavorting kits many times.

Then, on an early morning drive along Highway 20 near Vale, Ore., a couple of weeks ago, I saw a mature red fox slip from a field down into a burrow pit and fade into a culvert beneath the road.

I figured I'd seen my quota of red foxes for years to come.

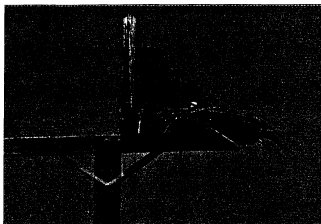
Well, I recently took the scenic route from Eastern Oregon to Walla Walla, partly on the Elkhorn Scenic Byway.

As usual, I stopped often along the way to snap photos of animals, including a pair of scrawny deer, a pair of coyotes that dashed away from the road and a young osprey in a nest.

I also missed opportunities. I saw an antelope about 40 yards from the road as I rounded a curve, for example. It disappeared by the time I turned around and went back.

Anyway, at Sumpter I turned back because snow blocked the roads to Ukiah or to Anthony Lakes.

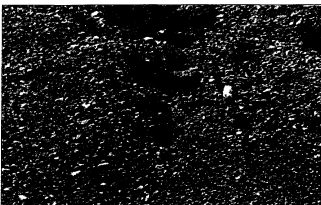
Then, after Baker City and Haines, I approached



U-B photos by DON DAVIS

IF YOU GO

From Vale I drove to Walla Walla on parts of The Elkhorn Scenic Byway. From Oregon Highway 26, I turned north onto Highway 7, toward Sumpter. At Sumpter, I discovered the road to Ukiah remained closed by snow. So I continued to Baker City and took Highway 30 to Haines and North Powder. From there I drove through Union, Imbler, Sunnyside and Toltgate. If you start The Elkhorn Scenic Byway at North Powder, it's a 106-mile drive of four-to-five hours. You pass Anthony Lakes, the ghost town of Granite, Sumpter, Baker City and Haines. For more information, Google The Elkhorn Scenic Byway.



North Powder. I nearly forgot the camera on the passenger seat.

As a result, I only glimpsed a bright-colored young red fox. It posed in the sunshine, like a lawn ornament, inches from the pavement as I slipped past.

I slowed but didn't stop for a quarter mile. I pulled off of the narrow road in sight of Interstate 84.

Although no other vehicles had passed, I expected the fox would be gone. Yet, I went back. I drove slow with the window down, the radio off, the camera

with the long lens ready and Nora the Schnauzer standing on my lap, front feet on the window sill.

The fox remained statue still. I stopped 15 feet away as a second fox raised its head.

I sat with the engine running and snapped photos before they slipped away.

Nora shivered with excitement, but she didn't bark and the foxes yawned and scratched.

Through the lens, I saw one had an engorged tick on its forehead.

Soon, I worried that a speeding



vehicle approaching from behind me would be unable to stop. I drove about 40 yards and pulled nearly into the right-side barrow pit.

I left Nora in the car and crossed the road. I leaned on a fence with a clear view of the foxes. Three of them. They ducked into the culvert under the road.

I waited, and in a few minutes the one with the tick on its forehead, reappeared. It looked at me. I stood as still as a post.

The fox looked away, and two others appeared.

Then, one walked to the road. It ambled across the road and climbed the bank into the bushes. I didn't see it again.

In the time I spent there, two pickups passed. Two guys waved but didn't stop.

I headed home soon after that.

Culverts on a paved road may not be all that safe for red foxes, so I hope those survive.

If I see any more this year, I'll call 2010 the Year of the Red Fox.

Contact Don Davis at dondavis@wwub.com.