

Frequently Asked Questions: Dauphin Island's Red Foxes and Wildlife Management

1. Is the Town of Dauphin Island trying to eradicate red foxes?

No. The Town is not conducting a fox “eradication” program. The Town works under binding agreements with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR), the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), and the Alabama Trustee Implementation Group (ALTIG) to protect endangered sea turtles and shorebirds.

These agencies oversee a targeted, science-based predator management program focused only on a defined area of Town-owned conservation land on the far west end of the island. The program does not affect the entire island or its general fox population.

2. Why is predator management necessary?

Dauphin Island is home to several threatened and endangered species, including nesting sea turtles, snowy plovers, and least terns. These species lay their eggs directly on the sand, leaving them highly vulnerable to natural predators such as raccoons, coyotes, feral cats, and red foxes.

Predator management is an essential conservation practice that helps restore balance to the island’s ecosystem. By reducing unnatural predation pressure on ground-nesting birds and sea turtles, wildlife professionals give these rare species a chance to survive and recover. The goal is not to eliminate predators, but to protect vulnerable species so that all parts of the ecosystem can thrive together.

3. Why not just relocate the foxes instead of removing them?

Under Alabama law, relocating foxes is not allowed. Moved foxes rarely survive because they lose access to their territory and food sources, and relocation can also spread disease to other wildlife populations. For that reason, state wildlife biologists consider relocation inhumane and ecologically risky. The current approach - limited, humane, and science-driven - is the most responsible option available.

4. What about a “fox sanctuary”?

The purpose of a wildlife sanctuary is to rehabilitate injured or sick wildlife and then release them back into their natural habitat. The foxes on Dauphin Island do not need to be rehabilitated and released.

5. Can any of the foxes be moved to a zoo?

That option was explored, but the answer was no. The Alabama Gulf Coast Zoo posted the following message on its Instagram page on September 4, 2025:

“We completely understand how heartbreaking this situation is, and we truly care about the well-being of our native wildlife. Unfortunately, due to permitting regulations, native wild foxes cannot become part of our ambassador collection. While it may feel like bringing them here would help, it’s not a viable or legal option for our zoological facility.”

“This is also an important reminder of why human-animal relations can create challenges—wild animals that become accustomed to people may lose their natural survival skills and can have negative impacts on the balance of local ecosystems. In places like Dauphin Island, which is a critical stopover site for countless migratory birds crossing the Gulf, foxes can pose an additional risk to exhausted birds and nesting populations.”

“We share in your concern and encourage everyone to support wildlife through habitat conservation and by keeping wild animals truly wild.”

6. What kinds of traps or methods are being used?

USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services uses modern, humane restraints that are designed to avoid injury. These are not the old injurious traps people often imagine. Traps are monitored frequently by trained wildlife specialists. The goal is to remove only the small number of foxes or other wildlife that have learned to dig up protected nests, not to harm or eliminate healthy foxes elsewhere on the island.

USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services strictly adheres to trapping best management practices (BMPs) that inform professionals about trap-types and trapping systems considered to be state of the art in animal welfare and efficiency that do not cause injury or damage to wildlife. Evaluations and recommendations in the trapping BMPs are based on animal welfare, efficiency, selectivity, practicality, and safety. The trapping BMPs provide a list of traps by species that meet or exceed the BMP criteria. For example, modern foothold traps have features like padded clamps or offset clamps to reduce injury and protect the animal. USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services also ensures that all procedures, regulations, and state laws are followed.

7. Who makes these decisions, the Town or the State?

The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) and USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services oversee the work. The Town’s role is simply to cooperate as the property owner of the West End Bird Conservation Area. The Town could have chosen a private nuisance wildlife removal contractor, but the Town chose USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services to make sure that the removal was done in the most targeted, humane manner using the most up-to-date methods and equipment. All activities are conducted within the bounds of Alabama law and federal wildlife-protection programs such as RESTORE and NRDA (Natural Resource Damage Assessment) tied to Gulf Coast restoration after the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The decision about which species, methods, and management plans are the result of years of research and study, which included public notices and public meetings. The plan which was recently challenged in court was finalized nearly two years ago (in December 2023).

8. Does the Mayor or Town Council have jurisdiction over wildlife?

No. Under Alabama law, all wildlife, including red foxes, is owned by the State of Alabama and managed by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR). Municipalities like the Town of Dauphin Island have no independent authority to regulate, relocate, or treat wildlife. The Town's only role is to cooperate with state and federal agencies, such as ADCNR and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's APHIS Wildlife Services, in carrying out approved management plans on Town-owned property.

The Town's officials don't decide which species are managed, how they are handled, or when those activities occur. Those decisions are made by trained biologists and wildlife professionals who operate under state and federal law. The Town's participation ensures that any work done on its land follows proper environmental protocols and is as humane, targeted, and science-based as possible.

9. Why are foxes considered a problem if they're part of the natural ecosystem?

Foxes are a part of Alabama's wildlife, but Dauphin Island is a barrier island - a narrow, isolated habitat that cannot sustain a large predator population without severe effects on nesting birds and turtles. When the fox population on the island gets too high, they have nowhere to migrate because they cannot "escape" the island. Studies by ADCNR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service show that a small number of "problem" foxes can destroy dozens of nests in a single night. Managing those few predators is key to keeping the overall ecosystem healthy and balanced.

10. Are red foxes protected under Alabama law?

No. Under Ala. Code § 9-11-230 and Ala. Admin. Code r. 220-2-.01, red foxes are classified as wild game animals. They may be lawfully hunted day or night, year-round, with no bag limit. That said, the Town's cooperative program is much more selective and humane than general hunting. It is based on scientific monitoring and focuses only on individual predators causing documented harm to endangered species.

11. Haven't the snowy plovers and sea turtles had more successful hatching seasons the past couple of years? If so, why is predator management still necessary?

It's true that the past couple of nesting seasons have seen better outcomes, but that improvement isn't because of predator management, which hasn't yet begun (as of November 3, 2025). Much of the success has come from favorable weather and a few seasons without major hurricanes or tropical storms, which has given these fragile species a temporary boost. Even so, their numbers remain critically low, and biologists consider just a handful of successful nests a major win after years of zero survival. The goal of the West End Bird Conservation Area is to give these endangered species the best possible chance to recover in the long term, not just in good years. Consistent management helps ensure their survival when conditions aren't as kind.

12. Why are birds and turtles more important than foxes?

They're not "more important," they're *more vulnerable*. Endangered sea turtles and shorebirds like snowy plovers are federally and state-protected species with small populations that can be wiped out by even a few nest predators. Red foxes, on the other hand, are not threatened or endangered. Red foxes are abundant throughout Alabama and the country and are legally classified as wild game with no closed season or bag limit. The goal isn't to eliminate one species to favor another - it's to protect the entire island's ecosystem by ensuring that one highly adaptable predator doesn't undo decades of conservation work.

13. Can't the foxes just find other food besides turtle and bird eggs?

Red foxes are among the most adaptable animals in the world. They thrive in cities, farmlands, forests, and even Arctic tundra. In most places, if food becomes scarce, foxes can simply move to new areas where small mammals, insects, and fruit are more abundant. But Dauphin Island is a barrier island, and the foxes here are isolated. When their natural food sources are limited, they can't migrate inland like foxes elsewhere. Some have learned to rely on easily available food, like turtle eggs, bird nests, or even human handouts. That behavior isn't "natural balance"; it's adaptation under constraint. Predator management helps correct that imbalance so the island's endangered species have a chance to survive.

14. Is it okay for people to feed foxes or give them medicine for mange or other illnesses?

No. Feeding or attempting to medicate foxes does far more harm than good. When foxes learn to associate people with food, they lose their natural fear of humans and begin approaching neighborhoods, cars, and public beaches, which puts both people and foxes at risk. Handfeeding also encourages unnatural population growth in areas that can't support it and teaches young foxes that human food is easier to find than natural prey. It also teaches them that human scent means food. Normally, human scent means danger to a fox and a fox would avoid the protective measures around the nests. But foxes who have been fed associate human scent with food and are drawn to the protective measures.

Treating foxes with unprescribed medication can be dangerous and is not permitted under state law. Only licensed wildlife rehabilitators or veterinarians working with the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources are authorized to treat wildlife. Well-intentioned feeding or dosing can actually cause the death of the animal being treated, spread disease, interfere with natural behaviors, and undermine legitimate wildlife-management and taste-aversion programs designed to protect endangered species.

When people step in to feed or medicate wildlife, even with good intentions, it disrupts the natural balance that keeps an ecosystem healthy. Think of it like the "butterfly effect"—a small change in one part of nature can ripple outward in ways no one expects. Helping one sick fox survive unnaturally might mean that more foxes compete for limited food, driving them to raid bird nests or turtle sites. Over time, those subtle shifts can throw off the entire food web. Nature has its own checks and balances, and when humans interfere without understanding the full picture, we often make it harder, not easier, for the ecosystem to recover.

15. How does this benefit the Island and its residents?

By meeting its conservation obligations, the Town helps protect endangered species, preserve federal and state support, and maintain the natural balance that makes Dauphin Island special. Effective predator management supports tourism, education, and the island's reputation as a national model for cooperative coastal conservation.

16. Is this just about the Town getting “free” money?

No. The Mobile County Commission was the recipient of the grant funds that were used to acquire approximately 838 acres of undeveloped land on the West End for use as an endangered bird conservation area. The Town never touched a dollar of those funds, but was the subrecipient charged with owning title to the land and implementing the Management Plan. The additional funds set aside for ongoing management are made available as reimbursement only. At best, the Town “breaks even” on this particular grant.

17. How can residents stay informed or share feedback?

The Town welcomes respectful public input. Meeting agendas and minutes are posted on the Town's website. Residents may also contact Town Hall with questions or comments. Everyone shares the same goal: protecting Dauphin Island's wildlife and natural heritage for generations to come.