

Rescued fox pup finds new home at Santa Barbara Zoo

By Hannah Guzik
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SANTA BARBARA — Navy biologists were searching windswept San Clemente Island when they spotted it, a puff of gray curled up by the roadside.



The Channel Island fox pup, a California endangered species, had been abandoned by its parents and was struggling to survive. They rescued the 1-pound, month-old pup.

On Tuesday, the canine stepped onto the mainland to take up residence at the Santa Barbara Zoo.

"I think this story speaks to the Navy's stewardship of the island and its animals," said Lt. Cmdr. Scott Strader, officer in charge of Naval Base Ventura County's San Nicolas Island, who released the pup from its carrier Tuesday. "We care for these foxes."

Named Beauregard by zoo sponsors, the 4-month-old fox will become an "ambassador," representing his species to zoo visitors in the hope that they will work to preserve the fox population on the Channel Islands off the Ventura County coast.

Channel Island foxes nearly became extinct in the late 1990s because of canine distemper virus and predators, introduced because of human involvement on the islands, said Sheri Horiszny, the zoo's director of animal programs.

Captive breeding programs bolstered the foxes numbers and today their populations on all the five Channel Islands are stable and increasing.

"You can go out there now and see the islands recovering — not just the animals, but the plants as well," Horiszny said. "This is such an amazing conservation story, and if we have a flagship animal like this fox, then people get engaged."



Each island has a different subspecies of fox, and all are on the state's endangered species list. The populations on Catalina, San Miguel, Santa Rosa and Santa Cruz islands also are on the federal endangered species list.

The Navy has an agreement with the zoo that allows foxes that can't be released back into the wild to be brought to the caged habitat, said Melissa Booker, a San Clemente Island wildlife biologist. Beauregard will live next door to Lobo, a fox from Santa Rosa Island.

Because the fox pup was so young when he was abandoned, he didn't learn survival skills from his parents and wouldn't be able to live successfully in the wild, Booker said.

It's unclear why Beauregard was abandoned by his parents, but it's possible they had multiple pups and weren't able to care for them all during such a dry year on the island, she said.

When the biologists found Beauregard, they took him to their fox hospital, known on the island as the "fox-pital." Veterinarians said he was in good health but hungry, so they fed him formula and puppy food, Booker said.

He put on about 4 pounds and, after receiving vaccinations and being quarantined for 30 days, he was finally ready to see his new digs Tuesday.

Zookeepers hope he will become comfortable enough around humans that he can be led on a leash around the zoo to meet visitors.

"People only love what they learn about," Booker said. "If no one gets to see island foxes, they'll never be supportive of their conservation."