

A Sourlands Rescue Story

Life in the Sourlands means making daily choices about the part one wishes to play in the natural landscape. Here is one story of how two long-time Sourland residents, Bob and Judy Czekanski, chose to interact with wildlife in the Sourlands:

We have lived in the Sourlands for nearly 35 years and have thought each day was like being on vacation. With the hustle and bustle of major parts of New Jersey we are fortunate to be in the serenity the Sourlands offers. Whether it is the varied birds, the raccoons, the secretive bobcat or even the daily deer - we still watch each as if it were the first time we've seen them.

This past summer we had two red fox kits visiting the yard on a fairly regular basis – we named them Rusty and Ralph. In the beginning they were beautiful in their shiny coats and with their bushy tails, but as the summer progressed we noticed a marked change. The shiny coats were thinning and the tails had less hair. By the end of August we knew there was a problem as both had lost most of their fur, their tails were bare and they were constantly scratching. After taking some pictures, we went to the Mercer County Wildlife Center to see what they could tell by looking at the photos. Confirming our fears they said it looked like mange. It is easily treatable but if left untreated it would most likely be fatal. They told us if we caught them and brought them in they would treat them. Tiny mites are the cause of mange and we were told they did not transfer between species. In searching the internet we found that mange is the number one cause of fox deaths in New Jersey.

We wanted to help – but this was all new to us. They explained we would need to get a live trap sized for coyotes, bobcats and foxes. We would need to disguise it so it looked more natural in a setting they were familiar with and bait it with dog food. The experiences they had were not encouraging – they said foxes were extremely smart and very difficult to catch. On average it might take several weeks to be successful. Knowing how quickly Rusty and Ralph were going downhill we weren't sure we had that much time to work with.

The Wildlife Center didn't have any traps available and none of the places we contacted could rent us a cage of the size we needed. We immediately got in the car and started visiting different stores until we found one. The cage is large: 58" x 26" x 17". We made it home and set it up in a spot Rusty and Ralph normally walked past. We tried to camouflage it as best we could – first covering three sides with black garbage bags and then covering it with branches and leaves. The end result made it resemble the entrance to a cave or den. They had told us to set it up for a few days, then put food outside the trap and after a few more days start putting the food inside. Within a day of us setting up the trap we found Ralph – he had not survived. We knew we didn't have much time left so we immediately put food in the trap. We thought for sure we would find the neighbor's dog or our resident raccoons each morning, but luckily did not. It took about four days and on the night/morning of September 14th we were able to safely catch Rusty unharmed.

We called our son and he came over with his pickup so we could bring the cage to the Wildlife Center. When the staff looked at him they said it didn't look good – but they would do what they could. Fortunately we had used the pickup to get Rusty to the Center a fox's scent smells very much like a skunk's and the bed of his truck had definitely been christened. It was only then that we realized how many times we had been at home and thought a skunk had passed through the neighborhood when it was more likely a fox.

Every week we would call to check on Rusty's progress. It was between four and five weeks before they knew the mange had been taken care of – but they needed to wait for his fur to grow back so he would be able to handle the cooler weather which was coming.

Once animals have completed their treatment and recovery period the Wildlife Center returns them to where they were originally caught. It had been almost eight weeks when on November 6th we got the call that Rusty was ready to come home. The Mercer County Wildlife Center brought him back that morning and he was released with his bushy tail and full coat of fur. He bolted out of the cage and ran about a hundred yards where he stopped and looked back, almost as if he were saying thank you. We felt so good knowing that in this instance we really had made a difference.

We have a motion activated night vision camera which we set up two nights later at a spot we knew Rusty used to frequent. We were pleasantly surprised when we looked at the pictures and saw one with Rusty front and center (his markings are very distinctive) but more surprising was the second fox which was with him. Welcome home Rusty!

Thanks to Bob and Judy Czekanski for sharing their story and for acting as positive players in the natural landscape of the Sourlands.

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