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While all of these animals were photographed elsewhere, there is a chance the diminutive swift fox is slowly making its way back into North Dakota.



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SLOW

Journey Home

By Marsha Sovada

Eliminated from North Dakota's prairies by the mid-1900s, the return of the swift fox to its native habitat has been anything but speedy. Biologists are finally seeing the first signs of this diminutive animal's homecoming.

The swift fox is the smallest of North Dakota's native species in the Canidae family, a family that also includes red fox, gray fox, coyote and gray wolf. This small fox weighs approximately 5 pounds and stands about a foot tall, or about the size of a large house cat. Males and females do not differ in appearance.

Swift foxes have a soft, fine fur. During winter, its fur is long, with a grizzled dark gray-buff color across the back, tail and sides, which fades to orange buff across the lower sides and legs. The chest is cream-colored and the belly white. In summer, the fur is shorter and more rufous-colored. Swift foxes have distinctive black patches on each side of their muzzle, and their ears are rounded and erect. The tip of its bushy tail is black, unlike the white-tipped tail of the red fox.

Swift foxes were once common on the shortgrass and mixed-grass prairies of the Great Plains, including North Dakota. Their range extended from southern parts of Canada's prairie provinces to northern Texas and New Mexico. They prefer short-structured grasslands in gently rolling to level terrain, avoiding tall grass and wooded areas. Sparse vegetation, which allows for good mobility and visibility, seems to be an important characteristic of areas used by swift foxes. Favorable conditions also include low densities of predators such as coyotes and minimal contact with human activities.

Accounts from early explorers describe swift foxes in North Dakota as being "abundant everywhere on the plains, though not often seen, on account of its small size and its disposition to hide when it can, in preference to running."

The first published swift fox record was written in 1801 in Alexander Henry's fur shipment records from Pembina Post of the Northwest Company's Red River District. In 1805, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark mentioned that the Assiniboine Indians were trading swift fox furs 25 miles above the mouth of the Little Missouri River, and naturalist John James Audubon reported swift foxes near Fort Clark in 1833 and again in 1843. To indigenous people of the plains, the swift fox was considered culturally important, and many tribes had swift fox societies.

Arrival of European settlers led to a fall in swift fox numbers, and by the 1900s it was rare to see the animals in North Dakota. Declines in North Dakota mirrored population changes throughout the species' historic range, especially on the eastern fringe. Poisoning campaigns for other predators took their toll as swift foxes are less wary than their larger cousins, and readily took the strychnine-laced baits widely used to control gray wolves and later coyotes in western North America.

Intense trapping, along with habitat changes and associated prey loss, also were factors in their decline. In the north, swift foxes may have relied more heavily on carrion, such as bison killed by gray wolves or Native Americans, to survive severe winter months. This substantial food source was no longer available once wolves and bison were eradicated from the region. Sadly, by the early to mid-1900s, swift foxes were considered extirpated from North Dakota, Montana, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Canada. Between 1915 and 2006, only four observations of swift foxes in North Dakota were reported, which was a fraction of the population that Lewis and Clark and early European settlers encountered a century earlier.

Since the 1960s, swift foxes have shown limited recovery in the southern portions of



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Fox Facts

- Swift foxes are identified by their small size, large ears, long bushy black-tipped tail, and black patches along each side of their muzzle.
- They are named swift fox because of their speed; they can run 25-30 mph.
- Swift foxes prefer open prairies with short grasses and forbs. Dense or tall vegetation is generally avoided.
- Food includes insects, small mammals, small birds, berries, seeds and carrion.
- Swift foxes probably pair for life and have one litter of about four to six pups each year. Both parents will provide food for their young.
- Timing of breeding varies across the species' range; pups are born in December to early January in the south and in March in the north. Gestation is about 51 days.
- Typically, swift foxes live three to five years in the wild; individuals in captivity have lived up to 13 years.
- Coyotes are the primary predator of swift foxes. Bobcats, golden eagles, owls and hawks also have been identified as predators.
- Swift foxes, unlike most other canids, use underground dens throughout the year. Dens provide escape cover from predators, protection from extreme weather in both summer and winter, and shelter for raising young.
- Swift foxes are primarily nocturnal, although limited daytime activities may occur near den sites.
- Typical dispersal distance is 15-25 miles, but 200 miles has been reported. Red foxes are known to disperse 125 miles and arctic foxes 500 miles.



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their former range; reported sightings began to increase and this trend continues. Today, swift foxes are thriving on the plains of Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and northern Texas. Their return was aided by the banning of poison, restrictions on methods of fur harvest, and the decline in fur value that has resulted in less trapping. The number of farms and ranches has declined substantially in recent years, resulting in fewer human activities detrimental to foxes.

But in the north, swift fox recovery was slow or largely nonexistent. Swift foxes remained absent from Canada, Montana, North Dakota, and only small, fragmented populations existed in South Dakota, Nebraska and Wyoming. The only significant expansion of swift foxes into northern regions has occurred through recent reintroduction programs. The first effort (1983–1991) was on the prairies of southern Saskatchewan and Alberta, Canada, just north of central Montana. A stable population of swift foxes has been restored to these prairie provinces.

Montana reaped the rewards from these early restoration efforts in Canada; those populations have expanded across the border into the vast prairies of northern Montana. This north central Montana population continues to expand. In 2005, a swift fox was spotted east of Plentywood, Montana, just 15 miles from the North Dakota border. Similar success was achieved from 1998–2003, with swift foxes being restored to Blackfoot tribal lands east of Glacier National Park in Montana. That population is expanding southward on the plains along the Rocky Mountains and eastward, where it will hopefully soon join with the central Montana population.

There are several ongoing swift fox reintroduction programs. The first began in 2002 and was spearheaded by the Turner Endangered Species Fund at the Bad River Ranch in central South Dakota, southwest of Pierre. In 2003, restoration efforts began at Badlands National Park and surrounding Buffalo Gap National Grasslands in South Dakota. Both reintroductions appear to have been very successful.

In 2004, a reintroduction program began on Kainai (Blood Tribe) tribal lands in Alberta, Canada, located north of the Blackfoot reintroduction site. Two new restoration efforts were initiated in 2006, one on the Lower Brule Sioux tribal lands in South Dakota near the Bad River Ranch and another on Fort Peck tribal lands in eastern Montana. It is too early to assess the status of these recent reintroductions, but based on earlier successes associated with other reintroductions, biologists are anticipating positive results.

North Dakota may be the beneficiary of reintroductions in surrounding states and provinces. In 2007, North Dakota had the first indication that swift foxes from South Dakota were dispersing northward. A jogger in Moorhead, Minnesota, running within view of the North Dakota border, discovered an injured swift fox wearing a radio-collar. The fox had been marked on the Lower Brule tribal lands in southern South Dakota. Just six weeks earlier, it had been recorded on tribal lands southeast of Pierre. Later in spring and early summer, two radio-collared foxes were killed by cars in Morton County, one near Hebron

and another near Glen Ullin. Both had been collared on the Bad River Ranch.

In January, a trapper captured a swift fox southeast of Bowman. This fox was not radio-collared, so its origin is unknown, but it could have traveled from the south or west of North Dakota or it could have been born in the state. As populations in Montana and Canada continue to expand, biologists also anticipate that the species will move into North Dakota's northwestern corner.

Although there have not been any attempts to reintroduce the swift fox into the state, animals are slowly returning to North Dakota's prairies. Keep watch, and perhaps someday you will see a swift fox mousing in a road ditch, or better yet, you will be entertained by pups playing in a pasture. Let's welcome home our little fox of the shortgrass prairie.

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CRAIG BIRLIE

Dorothy Fecske, North Dakota Game and Fish Department furbearer biologist, inspects a radio-collared swift fox killed by a vehicle in North Dakota.

Swift Survey

The swift fox is considered extirpated in North Dakota, yet listed as a furbearer with a closed season. The small fox is also considered a species of conservation priority by the North Dakota Game and Fish Department.

The potential of swift foxes in the state has prompted Department biologists to take a closer look at the population in North Dakota. This summer biologists will conduct track surveys in southwestern North Dakota to determine its presence. The public will also be asked to report sightings to the Game and Fish Department. To do so, call Patrick T. Isakson, Department nongame biologist, at 701-328-6338.