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# Swift Fox News

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The Swift Fox Conservation Team

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## Conservation Assessment and Strategy Completed

In 1995, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined that the swift fox warranted listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but was precluded by other species of higher priority (50 CFR Part 17, June 16, 1995). State wildlife agencies and cooperating federal land management agencies within the current U.S. swift fox range formed the Swift Fox Conservation Team (Team) in December, 1994. The Team has demonstrated a commitment to the conservation of the swift fox and its habitat by developing the Swift Fox Conservation Assessment and Conservation Strategy (CACS). The goal of the CACS is to provide a framework to direct conservation of swift fox as an alternative to a listing under ESA and a federally mandated recovery effort.

Accomplishment of conservation strategy objectives will be coordinated through the Team and reviewed annually by the USFWS. Specific strategies and activities are currently being implemented by state wildlife agencies in cooperation with the federal land management agencies, research institutions and private landowners. This effort reflects the present position of the states involved, that conservation of the swift fox can be achieved by this coordinated and cooperative management approach, utilizing state and federal funding sources rather than through a species listing under the ESA.

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## Is the Swift Fox Headed for Extinction?

Swift fox numbers and distribution declined in the United States in the early 1800s, continuing until the 1950s. This decline was largely the result of human-related activities associated with the settlement and development of the prairies. The loss of native habitat, predator control campaigns, unregulated trapping and hunting, and rodent control programs all contributed to a restricted distribution of the swift fox in the past. It has been considered that the loss of native habitat to agriculture, a changing prey base, and increased competition from coyotes and red foxes have maintained the restricted distribution of swift fox today.

But, recent information collected since 1950 now suggests that swift fox populations have been increasing and re-occupying some portions of their historic range. By the 1950s, the swift fox had begun a remarkable recovery from isolated populations in much of the western portion of its original range. Current swift fox distribution in the U.S. could be considered relatively widespread, although it remains limited to only a portion of its original range. The species is present today in Montana, South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas. How numerous swift fox are in this range, however, appear highly variable among the nine states.

are 12 to 12 ½ inches tall and about 31 inches long. The average weight is 5.4 lbs for males and 5 lbs for females. Swift fox fur is a dark buffy gray across the back, extending into a yellow-tan coloration across the sides and legs. The throat, chest, and belly are pale yellow to white. Specific field identification marks are considered to be the black patches on either side of the muzzle and the black-tipped tail.

## Habitat

The habitats selected by swift fox vary from region to region. They are known to occur in the shortgrass and midgrass prairies with level to gently rolling topography. The soils of these areas range from clay-loam to sandy or gravelly loam. The texture and looseness of the soil may be an important factor; swift fox dens are usually located in soil that is easy to dig.

Vegetation in swift fox habitat is usually sparse and short, dominated by short- and mid-grass species. Native grasses commonly associated with swift fox habitat include buffalograss, wheatgrass, and needle-and-thread grass. Shrubs, including saltbush, sagebrush, and snakeweed, may also be present. In areas of extensive cultivation, the native grasses may be replaced by crested wheatgrass, Russian thistle, common sunflower, lamb's quarters, bindweed, western ragweed, and prickly pear cactus.

As more investigations are underway to better understand swift fox ecology, several studies have documented the use on non-native habitats within the shortgrass/mid grass prairie ecosystem. In Kansas, swift fox are considered abundant in cultivated fields, using and digging dens in summer fallow, wheat stubble, growing wheat, sunflower, or corn fields.

## The Little Prairie Fox Description

The swift fox likely received its descriptive name from its ability to outrun predators and pursue certain prey species, particularly the black- and white-tailed jackrabbits. Adult swift fox

In the western portion of its range, swift fox are found in a wide variety of habitat types, including piñon-juniper, sandsage, and mesquite dominated communities. The extent to which swift fox can adapt to various native and non-native habitats within the grassland prairie ecosystem is not well documented. Observations in highly modified or other non-native habitats suggest a need to further investigate the fox's adaptative capabilities and survival rates within areas that are considered to be outside of the classic native grassland prairie.

## Distribution

The original range of the species was influenced primarily by the extent of shortgrass and mid grass prairie ecosystems. The historic range of the swift fox is reported to have extended from central Alberta, Canada, southward to central Texas and from central Nebraska westward to eastern Colorado. The extent of the historic distribution of swift fox, however, is difficult to accurately assess today, based on available written accounts and museum specimens.

Current swift fox distribution in the U.S. could be considered relatively widespread, although it still does not fully occupy its original range. The species is present in Montana, South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska,

Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas. Distributions and associated densities, however, appear highly variable among the nine states, with an identified population core occupying the states of Wyoming, Colorado and Kansas.

## Candidate Conservation Agreements

The USFWS has published a Draft Policy for Candidate Conservation Agreements (Agreements) under the ESA. This policy would provide incentives for private and other non-federal property owners to restore, enhance, or maintain habitats for proposed, candidate and certain other unlisted species. Agreements would be developed by participating property owners to remove the need to list the covered species as threatened or endangered under the ESA. The USFWS will coordinate closely with the appropriate state agencies before entering into Agreements with property owners to conserve species.

Look for more information on Candidate Conservation Agreements and how this program can be used to conserve swift fox in future issues of *Swift Fox News*.

### If you want to know more...

The *Swift Fox News* is a project of the Swift Fox Conservation Team. If you are interested in receiving more information about swift fox or would like to receive future issues of the *Swift Fox News*, please write the wildlife biologist representing your state (names and addresses are listed on Page 1). They would be happy to answer any of your questions.

The Team is interested in developing partnerships with private landowners who currently or historically have had swift fox on their property. Landowners interested in learning more about developing a partnership can contact their state wildlife biologist.

The Team encourages you to share this newsletter with family and friends. The overall goal of the Team is to work cooperatively with a broad spectrum of partners to maintain a viable population of swift fox for future generations.

