

“Fleet of Foot” Fox Prefers Native Prairie Habitat

Submitted by Leanne Thompson for SK PCAP

The Swift Fox is about the size of a jack rabbit or large house cat. Its black-tipped tail, smaller size and lighter colour distinguish the Swift Fox from the more common Red Fox. It gets its name from its speed. Individuals have been clocked at over 60 km/hr (37 mph) but its small size gives the illusion of even greater speed.

The Swift Fox was once found in dry prairie habitat from the southern Canadian prairie to Texas, but the species began to decline during the early 1900's. Re-introduction programs during the late 1980's and 1990's have resulted in small populations becoming established in the southern Alberta/Saskatchewan border area and in the Wood Mountain/Grasslands National Park Reserve region in Saskatchewan.

Swift Foxes prefer open, sparsely vegetated, short-grass and mixed-grass prairie, where visibility and mobility are unimpeded. Native vegetation common in such grasslands includes buffalo grass, bluestem, and wire grass. As such, native prairie commonly used as grazing land for livestock is a preferred location for this small fox.

Some of the leading threats to this species include: acceptable habitat, predation (by coyotes, Red Foxes and Great Horned Owls), accidental poisonings, unintended trapping, and vehicular collisions. Therefore, management practices to reduce threats are based on controlling or reducing these pressures.

First and foremost, conservation of large blocks of native prairie is imperative for the success of this species. Grazing of native prairie is a benefit as well as the Swift Fox prefers short vegetation. This can be achieved by rotating moderate to intensive grazing while focusing in the long-term on maintaining healthy native prairie.

Limiting road development, traffic and vehicular speeds in remote areas of native prairie areas can reduce the number of vehicular collisions suffered by this species, especially between dusk and dawn when this nocturnal species is most active.

Accidental poisonings through rodent and predator control have been identified as detrimental to the Swift Fox. If rodent control is necessary, shooting or fumigation is preferred so non-target species are not affected. Also, placing bait directly in rodent burrows can reduce the incidence of ingestion directly by Swift Foxes. Similarly, coyote control by shooting is the preferred method over poisoning or trapping. If trapping is used, placing traps at the correct height and/or setting traps to the proper weight limit will reduce unintended trapping of Swift Foxes. Badger burrows represent potential escape burrows for swift Foxes, so badger populations should be left uncontrolled whenever possible.

Livestock carcasses represent a huge attraction for coyotes and as such disposal of carcasses should be considered in the preservation of Swift Fox. When disposing of livestock carcasses on upland prairie, using randomly located sites rather than one single location and limiting any one disposal site to one or two carcasses at a time may reduce the number of coyotes attracted to the area, thus reducing the predation risk for Swift Foxes. However it is important to note that disposal of livestock carcasses is subject to regulation which must ultimately be followed as law.

Ranchers in southern Saskatchewan can have a positive effect on this endangered species. Maintaining large tracts of healthy native prairie will be important in the long-term success of the Swift Fox

population. So the next time you are out on the prairie in southern Saskatchewan and see a blur that resembles a large house cat – get out the field glasses and take a second look. It just might be this “fleet of foot” fox!

For more information on the Swift Fox please visit the Government of Canada’s Species at Risk website www.registrelep-sararegistry.gc.ca.