

SWIFT FOX REINTRODUCTION ON THE BLACKFEET INDIAN RESERVATION ^{TW}

Craig J. Knowles
FaunaWest Wildlife Consultants, Boulder, MT 59632

Minette Johnson
Defenders of Wildlife, Missoula, MT 59802

Ira Newbreast
Fish and Wildlife Deptment, Blackfeet Tribe, Browning, MT 59417

Clio Smeeton
Cochrane Ecological Institute, Alberta T0L 0W0

The swift fox (*Vulpes velox*) was declared extirpated from Montana in 1969 after 16 years of Montana fur harvest data with no record of a swift fox. A 1991 review of historical swift fox observations and specimens found that the best documentation of the swift fox in Montana prior to extirpation came from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. From 1901 to 1906, 43 swift fox specimens were collected between Cutbank and Browning, and in 1918, the swift fox was still considered common on the Reservation east of Glacier National Park. An aerial survey of Montana grasslands in 1993, identified the Blackfeet Indian Reservation as containing large grassland blocks suitable for swift fox reintroduction. In February 1998, the concept of swift fox reintroduction on the Reservation was discussed and later formally proposed. Defenders of Wildlife would provide funding for the reintroduction effort and the Cochrane Ecological Institute (CEI) would provide 20-30 captive-raised juvenile foxes for reintroduction each year for 5 years. In July 1998, a pre-release survey identified Richardson's ground squirrel (*Spermophilus richardsoni*) colonies on a Tribal ranch located 30 km east of Browning as suitable swift fox habitat. Twenty-eight foxes were released in this area in August 1998 using a modified soft release technique developed by the CEI. Four swift fox dens were found the following spring indicating at least some survival and reproduction. Releases have been made each year in late August, and from 1998-2001, a total of 101 foxes have been released. In 2001, 9 swift fox dens were documented on the Reservation with denning foxes being located up to 45 km from the release site.