

NORTH CENTRAL MONTANA SWIFT FOX SURVEY 2000/2001 ^{TWS}

Ron Stoneberg
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Hinsdale, MT 59241

Brian Giddings
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Helena, MT 59620

Swift fox (*Vulpes velox*) historically ranged throughout eastern Montana. However, their numbers were substantially reduced in the early part of the twentieth century. The swift fox was declared extinct in Montana in 1969. As part of a Canadian recovery effort, over 900 captive-raised and translocated wild-born foxes were released annually in the Alberta and Saskatchewan prairies adjacent to Montana from 1983 through 1997. A Montana graduate study in 1996 and 1997 documented wild-born swift fox breeding in Blaine County south of one of the release sites. During the winter of 1996/1997 Canadian researchers surveyed the swift fox populations on their reintroduction sites. A repeat survey was planned for 2000/2001 and FWP was asked to expand the effort into Montana. The Montana study area included 80 townships north of the Milk River extending from Havre to Opheim. Trapping began in November 2000 and ended on February 15, 2001 with 66 of the 80 townships sampled. A total of 1188 trapnights resulted in the capture of 38 different swift fox (3.2 foxes/100 trapnights). In addition, four foxes were seen in townships in which none were caught. Swift foxes were trapped or observed in 25 (38 percent) of the 66 surveyed townships. One fox had been previously tattooed and the rest were wild-born (one escaped prior to handling). The sex and age ratios of the handled foxes were, 18 adult/ 19 juvenile and 16 male/21 female. The total population occupying the Montana study area was estimated at 221 swift foxes based on an analysis of the capture results. The 2000/2001 survey confirmed that swift foxes had drifted south from Canada and were expanding throughout the native grasslands north of the Milk River in north central Montana.