

SWIFT FOX (*Vulpes velox*)

Description

The swift fox is quite small, about the size of a large domestic cat. It is approximately 24 to 32 inches long. Its fur is buff yellow or tan, with reddish and gray overtones. The tail is black tipped, and there are also areas of black found on each side of the snout. Winter pelage is dark buffy gray above, orange-tan on the sides, legs, and lower surface of the tail, and buff to white on the chest and belly; in summer, the coat is shorter, harsher, and more reddish. Differs from the kit fox in smaller ears, broader snout, and shorter tail. Diet includes mammals (jackrabbits, cottontails, ground squirrels, and mice), birds, invertebrates, and vegetable matter (grasses and berries).

Distribution

The historic geographic range of the swift fox extended over most of Nebraska. At present, they are found in a few areas in the western Panhandle and in the southwestern part of the state.

Habitat

The swift fox prefers open semi-arid, shortgrass and mixed grass prairie, including areas intermixed with winter wheat fields, generally away from intensively cultivated or irrigated cropland. Principle foods are cottontails, jackrabbits, small birds, insects, and small mammals, including mice and ground squirrels.

Status

Global: G3-Vulnerable. Federally not listed. State Endangered. Nebraska: S2-Imperiled. They are easily trapped and readily eat poison baits used to kill coyotes. Conversion of grassland to cropland has had an adverse effect on swift fox populations. The swift fox has disappeared from about 60% of its former range. It is still widespread in the central United States and relatively common in some areas, but declining/scarc in other areas. Some reintroduction efforts have been successful, and increases have been noted in states such as Montana. Threats include habitat loss and degradation to agriculture and mineral extraction, interspecific competition with red fox and coyote, vehicle collisions, and others; more information on population trends and threats is needed.

Management

Protection and maintenance of open native grasslands is the single most important thing needed to help insure the survival of the swift fox. Activities that fragment blocks of grassland within swift fox concentration areas and that create visual barriers, such as tree plantings or conversion of grasslands to irrigated row crops, are generally detrimental. Reducing mortality caused by humans may be essential to the expansion of the population. Hunters, trappers, and motorists in areas known to have concentrations should take precautions to avoid harming swift foxes.

More Information

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/projects/scp/assessments/swiftfox.pdf>

<http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/swiftfox/>

<http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.action?sPCODE=A085>