



# Capital Journal

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## Turner helps release swift foxes

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Ted Turner, left, and Gov. Mike Rounds released two swift foxes on Tuesday on the Bad River Ranches that Turner owns in Stanley and Jones counties. Two other swift foxes were also released, making 43 of the small animals released on the ranch this year. A total of 20 swift foxes were released on the ranch last fall. The release was witnessed by about 20 ranch employees, people associated with the Turner wildlife program and guests. The goal in releasing the swift foxes is to restore a population of swift foxes on and around the ranch and to assist in removing foxes from threatened status in South Dakota. (Capital Journal photo by Dorinda Daniel)

"There they go. It's hysterical," said Ted Turner as he watched the small animals vanish from his sight.

Turner came to the Bad River Ranches that he owns in Stanley and Jones counties to participate, in part, in the release of swift foxes.

On the edge of a prairie dog town, with bison roaming on bluffs nearby, Turner had opened the door of the small pet carrier. The swift fox inside quickly made a break for freedom.

Similar releases of swift fox were made by Gov. Mike Rounds, Kathryn Leach, a friend of Turner's, and Neil Lawson, who manages the wildlife programs for all of Turner's ranches.

"It was very gratifying, a beautiful sight to see the little fellows slip back into the wild," Turner said.

The swift foxes were the last four released on the Bad River Ranches this year by the program dedicated to preserving imperiled species and their habitats that bears Turner's name, the Turner Endangered Species Fund.

Releasing swift fox is an opportunity to restore the swift fox to what was once its native habitat in the Great Plains.

Swift fox are currently listed as a threatened species in South Dakota. It is hoped that a population of swift foxes on and around the Bad River Ranches will assist in removing foxes from the threatened species list in the state and keep them off the United States Fish and Wildlife Services' list of threatened and endangered species, said Kevin Honness, a field biologist for the Turner Endangered Species Fund.

The swift fox is the smallest of the North American canids, a group that includes wolves, coyotes and foxes. The Bad River Ranches offers the swift fox its preferred habitat of open, gently rolling and sparsely vegetated short- and mid-grass prairie, plus its favorite food of mice, prairie dogs, rabbits, crickets and grasshoppers.

Last fall, swift fox were reintroduced to the approximately 130,000-acre Bad River Ranches when 20 of the small animals were released.

From those animals, four litters totaling 16 pups were born in the wild.

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What those litters do is disprove those who said that the land wouldn't support swift foxes, Honness said.

With the release of the last four swift foxes on Tuesday, 43 swift foxes were released on the Bad River Ranches this year.

Of the swift foxes that have been released on the ranch, 29 live within the ranch boundaries, 11 live outside the ranch, nine are unaccounted for and 14 are known to be dead, Honness said.

The swift fox deaths have been caused by their main predator, coyotes, and by being struck by vehicles while on highways.

"We've been pleasantly surprised by the results and how the fox have adapted to this new landscape. We have great hopes for the future," Honness said.

More swift fox will be released on the Bad River Ranches until a self-sustaining population of about 200 are living on or around the ranch, he said.

Swift fox were also released at Badlands National Park this year, and the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe has a proposal for reintroducing swift fox, Honness said.

"If they are successful, we're shooting for several populations of animals throughout Western South Dakota. That will go a long way to recovering the species in South Dakota and in their entire range of the Great Plains," he said.

Referring to the bison on the bluffs surrounding the site where the swift fox were released, Turner said he was drawn to reintroduce bison on land he owns because they were almost extinct.

"How this got going is I own land in 10 states. I love nature. I love to hunt and fish," Turner said.

Native species are encouraged on the 1.8 million acres he owns.

On the Bad River Ranches, those native species include bison and prairie dogs, Turner said.

"We encourage places to be as natural as can be but commercially viable," Turner said.

He spends at least one week a year at Bad River Ranches. He has what ranch manager Tom LeFave called a modest cabin on the ranch.

Turner does, as he said, enjoy hunting and hunts gameanimals. Part of the reason Turner came to Bad River Ranches was to hunt pheasants.

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