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## Swift foxes showing promise

By **DORINDA DANIEL**  
Capital Journal Staff

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They're making their home on the range.

Two years after swift foxes were reintroduced to central South Dakota by the Turner Endangered Species Fund, some of the small animals are surviving in the wild.

A total of 60 swift foxes were released on the Bad River Ranches in 2002 and 2003. Of those 60, 30 are known to be dead, 21 are known to be alive and nine are missing, according to Kevin Honness, a project biologist with the Turner Endangered Species Fund. The swift foxes were fitted with radio collars prior to release in order to monitor their movements. Missing means that the foxes have not been able to be located in two weeks.

To the swift fox that were released in the fall of 2002, 16 pups were born in the spring of 2003. Monitoring collars were able to be placed on six pups. Of those six, four are known to be dead. It is impossible to know the whereabouts of the other pups because they do not have collars, Honness said.

Even though the survival rate was lower in 2003 than in 2002, it is comparable with the survival rate of swift fox in established populations in the wild, he said.

"Having a 50 percent mortality rate is still in the black. If things continue to go at this rate, we're confident we can achieve our objectives of reaching a self-sustaining population by 2007 or 2008," Honness said.

Self-sustaining means that more foxes will be added to the population than will die in a given year.

"We theorized that probably would take a population of 100 to 200 swift fox," Honness said.

Most of the deaths of the swift foxes were attributed to coyotes, their main predator, Honness said. Four were struck by vehicles, two were shot and two died of unknown causes.

Swift fox are the smallest of the North American canids, a group that includes wolves, coyotes and foxes. Swift fox are a threatened species in South Dakota.

The release of swift foxes on the Bad River Ranches is a way to restore wildlife that once lived in the area and to assist in removing swift foxes from a threatened species status list in South Dakota. The Bad River Ranches, owned by media executive Ted Turner, consist of approximately 138,000 acres along the Bad River in western South Dakota.

Things look encouraging for an increase in the swift fox population on and near the Bad River Ranches this year.

"We have four mated pairs in the wild right now in the breeding season. That looks promising for more pups. We will experiment with different techniques to put collars on pups," Honness said.

Swift fox pups are generally born in April or May and don't emerge from their birth den until reaching 3 to 4 weeks old.

Four pairs of swift foxes that are being held in soft-release pens on the Bad River Ranches and any offspring will be released this summer.

Plans are to release 30 swift foxes this fall that will have been trapped in either Wyoming or Colorado.

In order to establish a population of swift foxes on and around the Bad River Ranches, there needs to be suitable habitat, adequate prey and foxes to mate with.

The swift foxes are having to move around more than they usually do in order to find those three things, Honness said.

"As they move around more, they are exposing themselves to greater risks of (being killed by) coyotes or cars. As they establish themselves more, foxes have a greater chance of meeting up with each other, so in time we'll see shorter movement and an increase in survival," Honness said.

Two other events have occurred which will also help increase the number of swift fox in the area.

Last fall, Badlands National Park began a three-year swift fox restoration project when it released 30 swift fox in the north unit of the park. They also have four mated pairs in the breeding season, Honness said.

The Lower Brule Sioux Tribe has received a federal grant to research releasing swift fox on the reservation. That study will begin this summer and will probably take two years, Honness said. If swift foxes are released on the Lower Brule reservation, it will mean another population of swift fox that will contribute to the recovery of the species.

It is hoped that with over time, foxes from the Bad River Ranches, Badlands National Park and the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe will expand their ranges and establish themselves on territory between the project areas, Honness said.

"An isolated population is eventually doomed to extinction," he said.

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