

Information for the Commission
Notes on Swift Fox
In reply to a citizen's concern about trapping swift fox
Bob Inman, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Carnivore and Furbearer Coordinator
7/13/18

Swift fox were reintroduced in significant numbers in southern Alberta, Canada during the 1980's and 1990's. The Blackfoot Tribe also reintroduced swift fox around 2000, and some swift fox were moved from the expanding Canadian population (expanding into Montana) to Fort Peck Tribal lands also. Swift fox expanded their range and increased in numbers after those reintroductions. This expansion occurred during a period when there was no trapping season on swift fox, but they were occasionally trapped regardless as incidental to coyote trapping. The population expanded despite this level of trapping mortality. Since this level of mortality was sustainable, a season on swift fox was initiated, essentially to allow those fox that would be taken incidentally to be retained (rather than confiscated and destroyed).

I understand your concern about numbers. I am assuming that you are looking at the numbers in the new Swift Fox Conservation Strategy (Table 1 on page 8). It is very important to note the asterisk and footnote that indicate a "Preliminary Result." At the time of the writing of the swift fox conservation strategy, a preliminary analysis of the latest international survey data indicated a significant decline, 66%. We believed this was likely due to the severe winter we experienced in 2011. When those numbers were what we had, even though preliminary, we reduced the swift fox quota accordingly, by 67%.

Since that time, Dr. Axel Moenschlager of the Calgary Zoo, who authored the preliminary result, completed his final analysis and report. The conclusion was that swift fox are still distributed across a very similar area as they were in the previous survey (2005-2006). The final result also suggested that there were 347 swift fox in the surveyed area of Montana rather than 175. So, the decline was not as severe as thought earlier, more like 33% rather than 67%. I will update this in the conservation strategy now that we have the new numbers.

Still, a 33% decline is significant. And we had another, perhaps even more severe winter in eastern Montana this past year. Therefore, we are in the process of conducting another survey of swift fox during 2018, again with the aid, funding, and cooperation of Dr. Moenschlager and the Calgary Zoo. Even though there has been a decline, a quota of 10 swift fox is sustainable (<3%). Some of this is likely compensatory mortality as opposed to additive mortality, and we have no reason to believe this level of harvest would cause further decline. In addition, during the last couple of years, Wyoming has seen a very large increase in distribution and numbers of swift fox, and we have been getting more and more records from southeastern Montana, in what appears to be range expansion from Wyoming.

You are probably aware that coyotes are a very important factor within agricultural communities because they kill livestock. This is true to the degree that coyotes are classified in state statute as a "predator" where there is no closed season or

limit on take of coyotes. This state statute supersedes any authority on the part of FWP to set limits or seasons. In an interesting twist, coyotes are also the most significant mortality factor for swift fox. So lower coyote populations are better for swift fox. I do not know the precise amount, largely because we have not yet mapped potential swift fox habitat across the state as noted in our conservation strategy, but it is highly likely that most swift fox habitat exists on private land. Therefore, it is important to maintain good relationships with private landowners that control swift fox habitat, and to work to find ways to increase their knowledge of, interest in, and support of swift fox. Eliminating the trapping of swift fox, or even more so, restricting coyote trapping in the cause of swift fox, would do the opposite. Given the very low likelihood of any decline of swift fox due to trapping up to 10/year, along with the social and cultural implications of limiting coyote trapping, we believe that the current quota of 10 is appropriate and that it creates the best conservation situation for swift fox.

Swift fox are a classic example of a species for which there are not enough funds to do the work FWP would like to be doing, for example more intensive and regular monitoring of many species. Please see the Blue Ribbon Panel information at the link below to understand more what you can do to help that situation. Essentially, wildlife management has and continues to be funded by sales of hunting licenses and excise taxes on firearm and ammunition. This system has functioned as well as any in the world to get us to the improved status we enjoy at this time. However, as the number of people continues to grow, and the number of species that we need to monitor and manage has gone from mostly big game only (deer, elk) at the time of the establishment of our funding system (~1937), to all species including songbirds, small mammals, amphibians, bats, insects, and climate change, the funding system cannot keep pace with the needs. That is why the Blue Ribbon Panel is so important.

<https://www.fishwildlife.org/afwa-informs/resources/blue-ribbon-panel> If there is a place that you can put your energy to help achieve long-term, sustainability of all biodiversity, engaging as many people as possible to support this mission would be a great choice in my opinion. I think the vast majority of sportsmen and women who take pride in the system they established and its significant achievements are very welcoming of the idea of adding new, non-game species into the fold and giving voice and power to those who do not choose to hunt or trap, as long as their own culture is not threatened.

I hope you will consider all of these factors as they relate to the complexity of managing a public resource and am happy to answer questions. Thanks for your interest and please provide feedback on the proposed Swift Fox Conservation Strategy. We are excited to try and harness the interest in this species and the funds available to improve their situation in as efficient and effective a way as possible.