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# JUNIOR NATURALISTS

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## COME BACK SWIFT FOX

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When you read that another animal or bird has become *extinct*, you know it's too late — they're gone from the earth forever. Many animals are *endangered*, or *threatened*. It may be difficult to save them. Now, help is on the way for a small, prairie fox, the Swift Fox, that was *extirpated*. That means it is no longer found in the Canadian wild, even though it still lives in other places.

Back when the pioneer farmers were settling the west, these sturdy little animals roamed the open grasslands. But the cat-sized fox was killed off by mistake — it ate the poison and stepped into the traps meant for coyotes and wolves, who were considered to be pests. Luckily for us, some Swift Foxes continued to live in parts of the mid-western United States. Today, a program is underway to bring it back to Canada.

The Swift Fox is about half the size of its cousin, the Red Fox. Its coarse coat is mostly grey, with shades of tan and cream on the underside and legs. It has a bushy tail, tipped with black. Its large, pointed ears stand straight up. Dark patches show on each side of its sharp muzzle.

At the Wildlife Reserve of Western Canada in Cochrane, Alberta, pairs of captive foxes, brought from the United States, raised the pups that would be set free at well chosen sites in the Canadian prairies. The first were released in Alberta in 1983, more in southwestern Saskatchewan last

spring [1984]. A third group may soon have a new home in Manitoba. If the foxes choose to stay, they will be back in their natural grassland homes after almost 50 years!

To make sure the foxes feel at home, the people working on the program created a network of tunnels and boxes to closely imitate the kind of den it likes. They enclosed the dens inside a fence, hoping the foxes would stay for the fall and winter months.

They were fed and watched carefully. If all went according to plan, there would be new fox pups in spring. The animals would then be freed to do their own night-time hunting, for the mice, gophers, small birds, insects and reptiles that are plentiful in the prairies in spring.

Usually 4 or 5 pups are born to the Swift Fox some time in April. The male does the hunting for the first few weeks, while the family remains in the den. On sunny days, when they are about one month old, the pups will play outside. Pups and parents stay together for most of the summer, but once the young foxes have learned to hunt on their own, they go off to find their own dens.

Unlike most stories, this one will be best if there is no ending. For now, there are more questions than answers. Did enough pups survive the first year? Will some foxes remain to use the dens again? How many may have been lost to the arctic-like, winter

cold, or to hunters, or even run over on the highways as they searched far and wide for food? Will they find safe places to shelter on the wide open, wind-blown prairie they used to love?

Perhaps the biggest question is whether the Canadian government is concerned enough to keep providing money for programs like this one. You may be able to help persuade the Minister of the Environment of its importance by suggesting to your class

at school that they write to Ottawa. It's too late for any of us to see a Passenger Pigeon, but at least the Swift Fox is still alive. It deserves a chance to regain its rightful home, so that, maybe, some day, your children will see one!

The Swift Fox will have to use not only its speed, as its name suggests, but all of its strength and cunning to make it. Maybe, with lots of help from its human friends, it might be back — to stay!



*Swift Fox*

*Andrius Valadka*