

DRAFT Government Response Statement  
to the  
Recovery Strategy for the Gray Fox in Ontario

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1 **Gray Fox**

2 **Ontario Government Response Statement**

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3 **Protecting and Recovering Species at Risk in Ontario**

4 Species at risk recovery is a key part of protecting Ontario's biodiversity. The  
5 *Endangered Species Act, 2007* (ESA) is the Government of Ontario's legislative  
6 commitment to protecting and recovering species at risk and their habitats.

7 Under the ESA, the Government of Ontario must ensure that a recovery strategy is  
8 prepared for each species that is listed as endangered or threatened. A recovery  
9 strategy provides science-based advice to government on what is required to achieve  
10 recovery of a species.

11 Within nine months after a recovery strategy is prepared, the ESA requires the  
12 government to publish a statement summarizing the government's intended actions and  
13 priorities in response to the recovery strategy. The response statement is the  
14 government's policy response to the scientific advice provided in the recovery strategy.  
15 In addition to the strategy, the government response statement considered (where  
16 available) input from Indigenous communities and organizations, stakeholders, other  
17 jurisdictions, and members of the public. It reflects the best available local and scientific  
18 knowledge, including Traditional Ecological Knowledge where it has been shared by  
19 communities and Knowledge Holders, as appropriate and may be adapted if new  
20 information becomes available. In implementing the actions in the response statement,  
21 the ESA allows the government to determine what is feasible, taking into account social,  
22 cultural and economic factors.

23 The [Recovery Strategy for the Gray Fox \(\*Urocyon cinereoargenteus\*\) in Ontario](#) was  
24 completed on July 22, 2019.

25 Gray Fox is a medium-sized member of the canid (dog) family. It has peppered grey fur  
26 with reddish undersides and a black stripe running down its back to the tip of its tail.  
27 There are patches of white or tan fur on its ears, face, throat, belly and hind legs. The  
28 Gray Fox is the only canid in North America that can climb trees.

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30 **Protecting and Recovering Gray Fox**

31 Gray Fox is listed as a threatened species under the ESA, which protects both the  
32 animal and its habitat. The ESA prohibits harm or harassment of the species and  
33 damage or destruction of its habitat without authorization. Such authorization would  
34 require that conditions established by the Ontario government be met. In addition to  
35 protection under the ESA, Gray Fox is listed under Schedule 1 of the *Fish and Wildlife*  
36 *Conservation Act, 1997* (FWCA) as a Furbearing Mammal. There is no open season for  
37 hunting or trapping of Gray Fox in Ontario.

38 Gray Fox has a broad distribution and is found in both North and South America. Its  
39 range stretches from northern Venezuela and Colombia to northwestern Ontario in  
40 Canada. The species is believed to be adapted to warmer climates, and its current  
41 range may be defined by its ability to tolerate colder temperatures. In Canada, Gray Fox  
42 has been reported from Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Québec and New Brunswick;  
43 however, only Ontario is thought to support a breeding population. The Gray Foxes  
44 recorded in most other Canadian jurisdictions are thought to be young, non-breeding  
45 individuals that are dispersing in search of new territories. There is some evidence to  
46 suggest that Gray Fox may also be breeding in Québec.

47 Although Ontario's Gray Fox population is now thought to be less than 110 individuals,  
48 evidence suggests Gray Fox were historically common in southern Ontario. The species  
49 became extirpated around the time European settlers arrived in the province and  
50 subsequently reappeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The reasons for the species' historic  
51 extirpation are not well-understood but may have been related to land-use changes  
52 associated with European settlement or due to historic changes in climate that resulted  
53 in cooler temperatures that were unsuitable for the species. The reappearance of the  
54 species in Ontario is thought to result from relatively recent increases in range and  
55 abundance of Gray Fox in the United States and natural dispersal to Canada. The  
56 range increases may result, in part, from a warming climate that favours Gray Fox.

57 At the time the recovery strategy was written, Gray Fox sub-populations were known to  
58 exist in two widely separated areas in Ontario: Pelee Island in the south and  
59 northwestern Ontario from the Rainy River area to the area just east of Thunder Bay.  
60 Gray Foxes were first recorded on Pelee Island in the early 1980s. The Island is the  
61 only location in Canada where the species has been confirmed breeding for certain; this  
62 sub-population is currently thought to be stable and is estimated at fewer than 60  
63 mature individuals. It is unclear if individual foxes travel between Pelee Island and  
64 adjacent populations in U.S. jurisdictions. Given its small size and relative isolation this  
65 sub-population may be more vulnerable to unpredictable events such as disease and

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66 extreme weather. Gray Foxes were first recorded in northwestern Ontario in the early  
67 1940s; however, observations (including the first recorded evidence of breeding) have  
68 increased in recent years. This is thought to be a result of the expansion of adjacent  
69 Gray Fox populations in northeastern Minnesota and subsequent immigration of foxes  
70 to Ontario. Although strong evidence exists to suggest that this is a breeding sub-  
71 population; this is yet to be confirmed. The northwestern Ontario sub-population is  
72 estimated at less than 50 mature individuals; however, these foxes are thought to move  
73 between Ontario and the adjacent U.S. population.

74 Since the publication of the recovery strategy, breeding evidence has been documented  
75 in southern Ontario in the central Lake Ontario region. This new evidence suggests that  
76 the species may have further expanded its range; however, it is still considered  
77 relatively rare in this area.

78 Gray Foxes have occasionally been reported outside of the three areas where evidence  
79 of breeding sub-populations has been documented, including in areas along the shores  
80 of lakes Erie and Ontario as well as the St. Lawrence River and north to Lake Huron;  
81 however, these animals are considered non-breeding individuals.

82 Gray Foxes are omnivores and eat insects, birds, small mammals, and vegetation such  
83 as fruit and seeds. They have been found to use a variety of habitat types; however,  
84 they tend to use forested areas more than other fox species. The species prefers  
85 deciduous forest and areas with a mix of forested and open areas. Their preferred  
86 habitat is widely available in northwestern Ontario, and sufficient habitat to allow for  
87 natural increases in abundance and distribution is thought to be present. Habitat is more  
88 limited in southern Ontario. Given that much of the forested habitat on Pelee Island is  
89 located within protected areas, habitat for the Pelee Island sub-population is likely  
90 stable; however, continued conservation and stewardship actions are important to  
91 maintain its suitability. Information on potential habitat availability in the central Lake  
92 Ontario region is not yet available as the breeding evidence was only recently observed  
93 in the area. Given that populations in other jurisdictions are thought to play a key role in  
94 maintaining the Ontario population, habitat connectivity is likely to have an important  
95 role in promoting continued dispersal.

96 Gray Fox is thought to breed in the late winter or early spring and uses dens for raising  
97 pups, as well as resting. A variety of different features, including wood and brush piles,  
98 hollows in trees, and rock crevices, can be used as denning sites, but dens are  
99 generally located in dense brush with a water source nearby. Dispersal to new areas  
100 primarily occurs in the fall. Dispersing individuals can travel over large distances,

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101 commonly moving distances up to 50 km, with a few individuals known to have moved  
102 over 80 km.

103 Hunting and trapping of Gray Fox is currently not legally permitted anywhere in Ontario,  
104 although it occurred in the past. Although Gray Fox cannot be targeted, the species is  
105 occasionally incidentally captured in traps legally set for other species. Additional  
106 analysis of trapping information undertaken after the publication of the recovery strategy  
107 indicates that rates of incidental capture are likely significantly lower than initially  
108 reported as a result of errors in identification (e.g., mistaking Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)  
109 exhibiting a different colour phase for Gray Fox). However, given the low abundance of  
110 Gray Fox in Ontario, incidental trapping is considered to be a threat to the species. It is  
111 possible the resulting mortality could limit the species' expansion within the province;  
112 however, the severity of this threat warrants further investigation. Gray Fox may also be  
113 threatened by road mortality and by diseases such as canine distemper and rabies.  
114 Areas with high Eastern Coyote (*Canis latrans* var.) density may also limit range  
115 expansion and establishment of new sub-populations. It is likely that the abundance and  
116 distribution of the species in surrounding jurisdictions has an impact on the Ontario  
117 population; however, the degree to which the provincial population may rely on outside  
118 populations is currently unclear.

119 Gray Fox abundance in Ontario has been slowly increasing since its historical  
120 extirpation. The Pelee Island sub-population is currently considered stable and is  
121 important as it is the only confirmed breeding sub-population in Canada; however, there  
122 is also strong evidence of a breeding sub-population in northwestern Ontario where  
123 sufficient habitat is thought to be available to support natural increases in abundance  
124 and distribution. Recent breeding evidence from the central Lake Ontario region  
125 suggests the possibility of a third sub-population and requires further investigation. The  
126 prospect for continued natural increases in abundance and distribution of Gray Fox in  
127 Ontario is considered good due to the likelihood of continued (and perhaps increased)  
128 immigration to Ontario from adjacent jurisdictions. Warming temperatures resulting from  
129 climate change may also further improve conditions for Gray Fox in Ontario. As the  
130 species' condition is likely to improve in Ontario, the government will focus its efforts on  
131 maintaining the existing sub-populations and supporting natural increases in the Ontario  
132 population.

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134 **Government's Recovery Goal**

135 The government's goal for the recovery of Gray Fox is to maintain the current  
136 distribution in Ontario and support natural increases in abundance and distribution by  
137 filling knowledge gaps, reducing threats and maintaining or enhancing suitable habitat  
138 and habitat connectivity.

139 **Actions**

140 Protecting and recovering species at risk is a shared responsibility. No single agency or  
141 organization has the knowledge, authority or financial resources to protect and recover  
142 all of Ontario's species at risk. Successful recovery requires inter-governmental co-  
143 operation and the involvement of many individuals, organizations and communities. In  
144 developing the government response statement, the government considered what  
145 actions are feasible for the government to lead directly and what actions are feasible for  
146 the government to support its conservation partners to undertake.

147 **Government-led Actions**

148 To help protect and recover Gray Fox, the government will directly undertake the  
149 following actions:

- 150 • Continue wildlife disease research and surveillance activities in partnership with  
151 provincial and municipal partners and implement control measures (e.g.,  
152 distribution of bait vaccines) as necessary.
- 153 • Continue to manage Ontario canid species, including Gray Fox, through the  
154 FWCA.
- 155 • Through provincial direction for Crown forestry practices, continue to mitigate or  
156 avoid harm to Gray Fox and its habitat in areas occupied by the species.
- 157 • For the Pelee Island sub-population, explore opportunities to work collaboratively  
158 with the Township of Pelee, including the Pelee Island Environmental Advisory  
159 Committee, the federal government and local partners to integrate approaches to  
160 stewardship, implement recovery actions and explore integrated approaches to  
161 managing species at risk.
- 162 • Educate other agencies and authorities involved in planning and environmental  
163 assessment processes on the protection requirements under the ESA.

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- 164 • Encourage the submission of Gray Fox data to the Ontario's central repository  
165 through the citizen science projects that they receive data from (i.e.,  
166 [iNaturalist.ca](https://www.inaturalist.ca)) and directly through the [Natural Heritage Information Centre](#).
- 167 • Undertake communications and outreach to increase public awareness of  
168 species at risk in Ontario.
- 169 • Continue to protect Gray Fox and its habitat through the ESA.
- 170 • Support conservation, agency, municipal and industry partners, and Indigenous  
171 communities and organizations to undertake activities to protect and recover  
172 Gray Fox. Support will be provided where appropriate through funding,  
173 agreements, permits (including conditions) and/or advisory services.
- 174 • Encourage collaboration, and establish and communicate annual priority actions  
175 for government support in order to reduce duplication of efforts.
- 176 • Conduct a review of progress toward the protection and recovery of Gray Fox  
177 within five years of the publication of this document.

178 **Government-supported Actions**

179 The government endorses the following actions as being necessary for the protection  
180 and recovery of Gray Fox. Actions identified as “high” may be given priority  
181 consideration for funding under the Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Where  
182 reasonable, the government will also consider the priority assigned to these actions  
183 when reviewing and issuing authorizations under the ESA. Other organizations are  
184 encouraged to consider these priorities when developing projects or mitigation plans  
185 related to species at risk.

186 **Focus Area: Research and Monitoring**

187 Objective: Increase understanding of Gray Fox population levels and trends,  
188 habitat use and movement, and the threats impacting the species in  
189 Ontario.

190 Understanding the status of existing sub-populations of Gray Fox in Ontario will further  
191 our knowledge about the species and help to guide recovery efforts, as well as allow for  
192 evaluation of the effectiveness of these efforts over time. Investigating the role  
193 populations in other jurisdictions play in maintaining the Ontario population, the  
194 frequency and severity of threats, and how these factors impact the long-term viability  
195 (ability to persist) of the species, will help determine the best ways to support the  
196 continued existence of Gray Fox in Ontario. Exploring potential options to reduce

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197 trapping by-catch of Gray Fox will increase understanding of approaches to minimize  
198 this threat while allowing for the legal harvest of other species.

199 **Actions:**

- 200 1. **(High)** Develop and implement a standardized population  
201 monitoring method for Ontario sub-populations, including any  
202 new sub-populations identified, to determine population size,  
203 breeding status, demographics and habitat use as well as to  
204 document population trends over time.
- 205 2. **(High)** Evaluate threats that may affect Gray Fox in Ontario,  
206 including their frequency, severity and potential impact on the  
207 viability of Ontario sub-populations. This action may include  
208 investigating threats such as:
- 209 ○ incidental trapping;
  - 210 ○ genetic isolation for the Pelee Island sub-population; and,
  - 211 ○ road mortality.
- 212 3. Investigate methods to reduce by-catch of Gray Foxes in traps  
213 set for other species.
- 214 4. Monitor and evaluate the threat of diseases and parasites on  
215 Gray Fox, including through the study of any animals found  
216 dead (i.e., via necropsy).
- 217 5. Collaborate with other jurisdictions to assess connectivity  
218 between the Ontario Gray Fox population and populations in  
219 other jurisdictions, including the potential role those populations  
220 play in maintaining the Ontario population.

221	<b>Focus Area:</b>	<b>Awareness</b>
222	Objective:	Increase level of public awareness of and engagement in protecting
223		and recovering Gray Fox in Ontario.

224 Breeding sub-populations of Gray Fox are thought to occur in three widely separated  
225 areas in Ontario, although the species has also been occasionally reported in other  
226 locations in the province. The areas where the species occurs include publicly and  
227 privately-owned lands used for a variety of purposes including for agriculture, recreation  
228 and forestry. As a result, the involvement of several groups and organizations will be  
229 necessary to implement recovery actions and promote awareness of the species and its  
230 threats. Collaboration between organizations will support coordinated implementation of  
231 actions, improve efficiency and prevent duplication of efforts. Improved reporting of

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232 observations of the species (including diseased animals) will further awareness,  
233 contribute to filling knowledge gaps, and help to monitor potential threats such as  
234 disease.

235 **Actions:**

- 236 6. **(High)** Collaborate with organizations, landowners, land  
237 managers, and Indigenous communities and organizations to  
238 promote awareness of Gray Fox among people engaged in  
239 hunting and trapping, forestry, agricultural and stewardship  
240 activities in Ontario by sharing information on:
- 241 ○ how to identify the species and distinguish it from other  
242 similar species (e.g., Red Fox);
  - 243 ○ the species' habitat requirements;
  - 244 ○ how to report observations of the species, including reporting  
245 animals killed on the road;
  - 246 ○ protection afforded to the species and its habitat under the  
247 ESA; and,
  - 248 ○ actions that can be taken to avoid or minimize impacts to the  
249 species and its habitat.
- 250 7. Encourage reporting of suspected rabid animals to the Ministry  
251 of Natural Resources and Forestry Rabies Information Line (1-  
252 888-574-6656).

253 **Focus Area: Stewardship and Conservation**

254 **Objective:** Reduce threats to the species and maintain or enhance suitable  
255 habitat and connectivity between populations.

256 The results of research on reducing by-catch in traps (see Action 3 above) will allow for  
257 the informed development and promotion of best management practices to reduce by-  
258 catch of Gray Fox. These actions are expected to reduce threats to the Gray Fox while  
259 allowing the legal harvest of other species to continue.

260 On Pelee Island, much of the suitable forest habitat for Gray Fox is located within  
261 protected areas; conservation organizations and local partners have been actively  
262 involved in the ongoing maintenance and restoration of these areas. In addition, many  
263 private landowners have undertaken efforts to preserve natural habitat on the island.  
264 The continuation of these efforts is important to maintain habitat suitability and  
265 availability for the Pelee Island sub-population. It is also important to maintain healthy  
266 forest ecosystems in areas of Ontario that may support additional sub-populations, such

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267 as northwestern Ontario and the central Lake Ontario region, in order to ensure suitable  
268 habitat is available for the species. Given that populations in other jurisdictions are  
269 thought to play a key role in maintaining the Ontario population, maintaining or  
270 improving suitable habitat in potential dispersal areas is expected to promote continued  
271 connectivity between jurisdictions.

272 **Actions:**

- 273 8. Support development and promotion of best management  
274 practices to reduce by-catch of Gray Fox in traps set for other  
275 animals. This action should be informed by the results of  
276 research conducted under Actions 2 and 3 above.
- 277 9. Encourage continued conservation and stewardship of forest in  
278 areas occupied by Gray Fox (particularly on Pelee Island) as  
279 well as in areas where the species is thought to disperse  
280 between Ontario and other jurisdictions.

281 **Implementing Actions**

282 Financial support for the implementation of actions may be available through the  
283 Species at Risk Stewardship Program. Conservation partners are encouraged to  
284 discuss project proposals related to the actions in this response statement with Ministry  
285 of the Environment, Conservation and Parks staff. The Ontario government can also  
286 advise if any authorizations under the ESA or other legislation may be required to  
287 undertake the project.

288 Implementation of the actions may be subject to changing priorities across the multitude  
289 of species at risk, available resources and the capacity of partners to undertake  
290 recovery activities. Where appropriate, the implementation of actions for multiple  
291 species will be co-ordinated across government response statements.

292 **Reviewing Progress**

293 The ESA requires the Ontario government to conduct a review of progress towards  
294 protecting and recovering a species no later than the time specified in the species'  
295 government response statement, or not later than five years after the government  
296 response statement is published if no time is specified. The review will help identify if  
297 adjustments are needed to achieve the protection and recovery of Gray Fox.

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299 **Acknowledgement**

300 We would like to thank all those who participated in the development of the Recovery  
301 Strategy for the Gray Fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*) in Ontario for their dedication to  
302 protecting and recovering species at risk.

303 **For Additional Information:**

304 Visit the species at risk website at [ontario.ca/speciesatrisk](http://ontario.ca/speciesatrisk)  
305 Contact the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks  
306 1-800-565-4923  
307 TTY 1-855-515-2759  
308 [www.ontario.ca/environment](http://www.ontario.ca/environment)