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BAY AREA NONPROFIT PUBLISHES FIRST STATEWIDE GRAY FOX SYNTHESIS IN FORTY YEARS

A Species Without a Scorecard

PALO ALTO, CA — A Bay Area nonprofit has published what may be the first comprehensive synthesis of the California gray fox's status in more than forty years — and the findings raise serious questions about a species that has largely escaped scientific and regulatory attention.

Status, Signals & Data Gaps: The California Gray Fox, released today by the Urban Wildlife Research Project (UWRP), draws on six months of original researcher outreach, published scientific literature, and fifteen years of field observation at the Palo Alto Baylands Preserve. The report concludes that California currently lacks the monitoring infrastructure to know whether the gray fox population is healthy and thriving — or stressed and declining.

The report arrives as California legislators consider SB 1135, the California Wildlife Coexistence Act, which passed the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee in April 2026 and is currently before the Senate Appropriations Committee. If enacted and funded, the bill would establish a Wildlife Coexistence Program and Technical Advisory Committee that could create a framework for the kind of species-level mortality reporting that currently does not exist for gray fox. (Full bill text:

https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260SB1135)

"The last systematic statewide assessment of California's gray fox was conducted in 1984," said AnMarie Rodgers, the report's lead author and a UWRP board member. "In the intervening forty years, the species has moved from being managed as a fur resource to being essentially unmanaged — present in the landscape, but absent from any monitoring framework."

The report was catalyzed by findings from the Midwest, where rigorous studies in Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, and Illinois have documented sharp gray fox declines over the past two to three decades. In 2025, Illinois closed its gray fox hunting season indefinitely. California has no comparable data.

The report synthesizes observations from more than a dozen researchers, agency staff, and conservation practitioners, including wildlife geneticists, urban carnivore ecologists, and field biologists working across the state. It identifies canine distemper, habitat fragmentation, structural simplification of shrublands, and road mortality as recognized pressures — none of which have been assessed at a population scale in California.

UWRP's own fifteen-year field record at the Palo Alto Baylands anchors the report's central concern. In 2016, canine distemper eliminated the preserve's entire gray fox population — approximately 25 animals documented by founder and field researcher Bill Leikam. Nearly a decade later, the population has not recolonized. The creeks and riparian corridors that once connected the Baylands to surrounding fox populations have been fragmented by roads, culverts, and urban development.

That absence has not gone unnoticed by the next generation of wildlife watchers. Milo, a 12-year-old founding member of UWRP's Kit Club — a youth wildlife monitoring program named for baby gray foxes — recently spotted and named a gray fox along Matadero Creek near the Baylands. He called the fox Barron.

"I've been tracking gray foxes in our neighborhood for a few years now," said Milo. "What's really cool is that neighbors help too. People send me videos when they spot one. It's become an exciting part of living in Barron Park. Gray foxes are an important part of our ecosystem and community."

The report is framed explicitly as a non-advocacy synthesis for professional audiences — scientists, government officials, and conservation practitioners — and closes with an invitation to researchers and agencies to begin building the coordinated monitoring effort California currently lacks.

"Our beloved bush dog is an understudied species," UWRP Executive Director Greg Kerekes said. "With this paper we hope to start the conversation about the conservation status of the California gray fox, so we may begin to understand the health of their populations regionally and statewide."

Status, Signals & Data Gaps: The California Gray Fox is available at urbanwildliferesearchproject.org/gray-fox-status-inquiry/.

About the Urban Wildlife Research Project

The Urban Wildlife Research Project is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Co-founded by field researchers Bill Leikam and Greg Kerekes, UWRP has conducted long-term gray fox behavioral research at the Palo Alto Baylands Preserve since 2009. Its work spans field observation, citizen science, and policy research at the intersection of urban wildlife and habitat connectivity.

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