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### DATED MATERIAL

# MAKING IT COUNT: SILVER FOX RABBIT CENSUS

Longtime Livestock Conservancy member and Silver Fox rabbit breeder Vernon Brown exemplifies the passion of rare breed stewards. Brown also shows the impact just one person can have on heritage breed conservation.

He operates Brownie's Bunnies in Kingsville, Maryland and is an elected National Silver Fox Rabbit Club board member. Involved with The Livestock Conservancy and heritage breed conservation for more than 20 years, Brown is passionate about building community among rabbit enthusiasts. He shared his enthusiasm as a 2021 guest on the organization's "Rabbit Chat," a YouTube program (available at [bit.ly/Silver-Fox-Rabbit-Chat](https://bit.ly/Silver-Fox-Rabbit-Chat)) and continues to promote the breed as administrator of the Mid-Atlantic Silver Fox Breeders Facebook group. Through social media he enthusiastically promotes Silver Fox rabbits and mentors newer breeders of the rabbits, listed as Recovering on the Conservation Priority List.

Because he noted the growth in numbers of Silver Fox rabbits at shows over the last few years, Brown and his fellow breeders were eager to see just how close the Silver Fox might be to graduation, and what additional steps they could take to achieve this



Vernon Brown

milestone. Brown decided to conduct a census of Silver Fox rabbits. These animal-by-animal counts are priceless for heritage breed conservation, but, due to the significant time required, they are often only conducted at critical points in a breed's history. The last official numbers The Livestock Conservancy had for Silver Fox were from 2019.

Following advice from The Livestock

Conservancy, and using a short online video encouraging breeders to participate, Brown launched a Silver Fox census. More than 270 breed stewards championed the census, reporting data including:

- Number of breeding bucks and does
- Number of offspring per year
- Average flock size
- Membership in the Silver Fox Rabbit Club, American Rabbit Breeders Club and The Livestock Conservancy
- Whether breeders are maintaining breeding records
- Flock purpose including exhibition, meat and fur

- Whether breeders consume or sell meat from their rabbits
- Number of Silver Fox breeders who responded to the survey

Brown discovered survey participants had produced a whopping 16,000 Silver Fox kits in the previous twelve months! More importantly, he documented more than 3300 breeding rabbits across the U.S., breeding rabbits for a variety of purposes. The data expanded The Livestock Conservancy's population estimates with highly accurate detail. Combined



Silver Fox rabbits move to Recovering on the CPL thanks to efforts including an extensive breed census.

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with rabbit registration and show numbers provided by ARBA, the 2023 Silver Fox Census clearly demonstrated the breed is truly growing toward graduation from the CPL.

When a breed is in the Recovering category, like Silver Fox rabbits, breed clubs and associations can play a significant role by developing a promotional plan to attract more breeders and taking steps to educate new breeders about conservation breeding. Other steps may be useful to some breeds, such as assessment of genetic relatedness. This may be accomplished by herdbook analysis for pedigreed animals or a DNA study for unpedigreed animals.

The goal is to have lots of carefully bred, thriving flocks with well-distributed genetic diversity.

“When it comes to conservation breeding, often it’s the long-time breeders who know their breed the best. Finding ways to share the hard-won knowledge of decades of breeding helps keep new breeders from getting discouraged and maintains the genetic integrity of the breed,” explains Alison Martin, program director for The Livestock Conservancy.

Brown and the National Silver Fox Rabbit Club are committed to promotion and mentorship; it should take just

The Silver Fox is truly a multi-purpose breed, a great fit for homesteaders or urban farmers raising rabbits for meat and fur or for those who enjoy perfecting their rabbits for the show table. Silver Fox rabbits are known for their docile and gentle nature. The young are born either solid black or blue and begin to show silvering of their fur at about 4 weeks. The silvering process takes four months to complete. The fur is one of the most attractive and unusual features of the breed. It is extremely dense and 1 1/2 to 2 inches in length. When the fur is stroked from tail to head, it will stand straight up until stroked in the opposite direction. This trait is found in no other breed and greatly resembles the pelt of the silver fox of the Arctic.



a little more push from producers and exhibitors to bump up Silver Fox numbers so the breed will no longer be endangered.

“Vernon Brown’s efforts illustrate the impact just one person can have on building and encouraging an active community of fellow breeders to collaborate to save a breed,” notes The Livestock Conservancy’s Senior Program Manager Charlene Couch. “Just imagine if every breed organization on the Conservation Priority List had a Vernon Brown in their ranks! His leadership and spirited efforts are something we can all strive to emulate.”

Because of this work, The Livestock Conservancy is now establishing new criteria for graduation of heritage rabbit breeds OFF the Conservation Priority List. Brown’s involvement will continue as he and the club will be working closely with Conservancy staff to develop next steps for the Silver Fox rabbit.

“Silver Fox rabbits may very soon be removed from the list as a rare breed, but they should never stop being cherished and stewarded as a precious Heritage Breed,” says Brown. ■

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