



**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM**

TELEPHONIC INTERVIEW Time (5:51)

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET (HOST – SARAH LEON WITH PETE GOBER)

This transcript was produced from audio provided by FWS Endangered Species Program

PROCEEDINGS

(Music plays.)

MS. LEON: Hello there. This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I'm on the phone today with Pete Gober, the Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Coordinator out at the South Dakota Field Office. Hi, Pete. How are you today?

MR. GOBER: I'm fine. How are you, Sarah?

MS.LEON: I'm doing fine thanks. Our listeners are wanting to know a little about the black-footed ferret, so I was hoping you could talk to us about this species today.

MR. GOBER: Okay.

MS.LEON: What can you tell us about the black-footed ferret?

MR. GOBER: Well, I guess first off a general description is that it's a small predator—about a pound and a half to two and a half pounds. It lives in the western Great Plains. It's actually a top predator in a very large, often overlooked, ecosystem that is the grasslands. The grasslands are one of the most impacted in the world as well as in this country. If you just think about all the farming that takes place and how productive our agricultural system is in the U.S., you can image how much that habitat has been influenced.

The ferret preys almost exclusively on prairie dogs, which are a large ground squirrel similar in size to the ferret. And it relies on the burrows of prairie dogs for shelter. It's

what's called an obligate predator. Without prairie dogs you wouldn't have ferrets. In its own way, the ferret is similar to the systems that you see with larger animals like wolves, moose, grizzly bears, and elk. Those sorts of predator/prey systems. This is just a more exclusive link--ferrets have to have prairie dogs. More than 99 percent of their diets are prairie dogs, and prairie dog burrows are the only places ferrets can live.

Prairie dogs once numbered in the billions and occupied hundreds of millions of acres across the west. And likely there were billions of ferrets, but at one point we thought they were extinct in 1980 because so much of their habitat had been plowed for farming. So many prairie dogs had been poisoned because of their competition with domestic livestock. They both eat grass. And because of the introduction of an exotic disease, sylvatic plague, that prairie dogs had no immunity to.

We found one last population of ferrets in 1981 in Wyoming. A ranch dog brought one in and the ranchers advised the wildlife agencies. Since then, captive breeding of those animals brought them back somewhat.

MS.LEON: Just ten years ago, biologists regarded the black-footed ferret as the most endangered mammal in the United States. Can you give us a current status update?

MR. GOBER: Yes ma'am. We now have ferrets reintroduced in eight western states. They occur historically in twelve western states. We've also reintroduced them into Mexico, and just this past fall into Saskatwan, Canada.

There are about 1,000 ferrets in the wild. Each fall that number declines to about 500 breeding adults at these sites. We also maintain about 300 animals in captivity to continue reintroduction efforts with breeding these animals and introducing offspring annually.

They still need prairie dogs and they always will. Prairie dogs are regarded as pests in the agricultural community, in many situations. Ferrets are still threatened by disease. They are less threatened by more conversion of the prairie to plowing, because most of the good farm land has already been farmed. But, technology might change that. There's certainly going to need a place to live like any other animal. And to do that we may have to find a way to find financial incentives for farmers and ranchers on the land. We may have to find a way to limit prairie dog expansion beyond the areas where we want them to serve ferrets and other animals. And we've certainly got to find a way to be flexible with Endangered Species regulations so that's not a problem.

MS.LEON: I know that the Service really values our conservation partners. If not for them, many recovery efforts just wouldn't see the same level of success. And I know that the black-footed ferret is a prime example of this. Pete, can you tell us about some of the key conservation partners involved in this species recovery?

MR. GOBER: Yes ma'am. This recovery program has been going on for over 25 years, and many partners have participated. There have been different champions at each of

these different reintroduction sites. At present, we have 19 different sites where we put ferrets out. Federal agencies have been key players in some situations, like the National Park Service or the Forest Service. In other situations, individual states have been leaders like the Wyoming Game and Fish or the Arizona Game and Fish Department. We have a number of Tribes involved as well like the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe or Rosebud Sioux Tribe on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana. And then there have been private landowners as well, like Ted Turner's ranches and a ranch in Kansas that Larry Haverfield and Gordon Barnhardt have. So there are many, many players involved. They continue to meet and work together and they remain as enthusiastic as they have been over the years.

MS.LEON: Pete, I'd like to end with a big question here. Can you tell us why people should care about this species recovery?

MR. GOBER: Well, as I mentioned earlier, the ferret is a top predator in its own way in its part of the world. And metaphorically speaking, I guess it has broad shoulders or long coat tails. It can bring along conservation of the prairie dog, and by doing that help conserve species that may be at risk in the future. There are a number of species of conservation concern now, like ferruginous hawks, golden eagles, mountain plovers, burrowing owls, and swift fox that depend on one degree or another on this prairie dog ecosystem. And the recovery of a high profile species like the ferret helps provide a place for those species too.

MS.LEON: Thank you, Pete, for your time today.

MR. GOBER: Okay. Thank you for your help.

MS.LEON: This is Sarah Leon for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Thanks for listening.