

# Black-footed Ferrets

## Return to Mexico

by Dario Bard



Photos by Dario Bard/USFWS

This past October 2, on a moonlit night outside the town of Janos in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, a captive-bred black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) peered out of his cage, reluctant to venture into the vast Chihuahuan Desert. For two days, he had been cooped up in the back of a government van with 33 others of his species. They traveled the highways from Laramie, Wyoming, to Janos, with an overnight respite at the El Paso Zoo, finally arriving at a secluded ranch off a dirt road. By chance, he was chosen as the first of the group to be released. His cage door was opened and, as a group of U.S. and Mexican biologists anxiously waited for him to emerge, he shrank back into his artificial prairie dog burrow—a synthetic rubber tube—while the real thing lay before him less than a foot away.

It was almost as though he knew what the biologists knew: that he was about to become one of the first black-footed ferrets to return to a country that hadn't seen a member of his species for as long as anyone could remember.

The black-footed ferret, North America's only native ferret, suffered tremendous population declines as a result of rural development and disease, two factors that also adversely impacted prairie dogs (*Cynomys* spp.), which are vital to the ferret's survival. Black-footed ferrets prey almost exclusively on prairie dogs and den in prairie dog burrows. With the death of a captive ferret in 1979, the species was thought to be extinct. Just two years later, however, a rancher found a lone ferret near Meeteetse, Wyoming, which led to the discovery of a small colony. Soon after, even this last remaining population fell victim to disease.

In a last-ditch effort to save the species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, together with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, captured 18 disease-free individuals and initiated a captive breeding program. In 1996, the Service rallied interested parties and established the Black-footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team, a 27-member multi-agency partnership that includes representatives from federal and state governments, Native American tribes, zoos from the U.S. and Canada, and non-profit organizations throughout North America. Through this tremendous collaborative effort, the captive breeding program has been remarkably successful. Today, approximately 700 black-footed ferrets live in captive breeding facilities and in wild populations reintroduced into Wyoming, South Dakota, Montana, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. Although roughly half have been reintroduced into the wild, reestablishing self-sustaining wild black-footed ferret populations has not been easy. One of the factors making the species' return into the wild difficult is the scarcity of sufficiently large, disease-free prairie dog populations.

Biologists are optimistic about the Janos location, a grassland area of the Chihuahuan Desert. The release site contains the largest remaining prairie dog complex in North America, with an estimated 500,000 healthy prairie dogs. A diverse assemblage of species coexists at the site, including the pronghorn (*Antilocapra americana*), burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia*), ferruginous hawk (*Buteo regalis*), badger (*Taxidea taxus*), kit fox (*Vulpes macrotis*), and a bird the Service has proposed for listing as a threatened species, the mountain plover (*Charadrius montanus*).

"We hope they do well enough in Mexico so that one day we can bring a few back to the U.S. to help us with re-establishment efforts here," says Mike Lockhart, the Service's black-footed ferret recovery coordinator. "The idea is to breed more and to spread them out."

In all, Service biologists made the trip to Janos four times this past fall, releasing a total of 91 ferrets. The October 2 release marked the first significant release of ferrets into Mexico, preceded only by a release of four ferrets a few weeks earlier as a test run conducted by Lockhart and Mexican biologists.

Dr. Gerardo Ceballos, a professor with the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM), one of the Service's Mexican partners in this endeavor, and the leader of the effort in Janos, believes the ferrets will fare well and, as a result, will help him and his colleagues protect the grasslands of the region.

"Having a high-profile endangered species like the black-footed ferret will help us establish a biological reserve in the area," says Dr. Ceballos. He would like to see the grasslands in the region conserved, as would many of the local residents, including the owner of the ranch where the ferrets are being released. "If we don't protect this area from the desertification process, the land won't be any good for wildlife, for ranching, for farming, for anything. It is important to keep the grassland ecology healthy."

On October 2, Lockhart, Ceballos, and Service wildlife biologist Paul Marinari

arrived in Janos in the dark of night, having spent the greater part of the day navigating the documentation and permitting process required to bring the 34 ferrets across the U.S./Mexico border. At the release site, they were joined by participants at a grasslands conservation conference, who were on hand to witness the historic moment. Everyone waited patiently for the first ferret to take his first steps on Mexican soil. When it became clear he was not about to overcome his fears any time soon, Marinari reached into the cage, lifted the tube with the ferret still inside, and laid it down in front of the prairie dog burrow. Almost instantly, the ferret regained his species' renowned curiosity. He looked around, wandered across the feet of one of the gathered biologists, and, after seeming to contemplate a return to his cage, turned his back on his life in captivity and slipped down the prairie dog burrow. He had found his freedom and a new home in Mexico.

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USFWS photo by LuRay Parker