

A photograph of two black-footed ferret kits peering out of a burrow. The kits have distinctive black and white markings on their faces and bodies. They are looking directly at the camera with a curious expression. The background is a dark, earthy tunnel.

Black-footed Ferret Recovery

Are We There Yet?

by Pete Gober

Two ferret kits peer out of a burrow in a preconditioning pen located at the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center. Preconditioning is an important precursor to reintroducing captive bred ferrets into the wild. Photo Credit: Kimberly Tamkun, USFWS

The short answer, but not the final answer, is no—not yet. Nevertheless, the right partners and the right actions have been, and continue to be, in place, and the status of the black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) has improved dramatically as a result. Black-footed ferret recovery partners are optimistic that the species could be fully recovered in another decade—something that was unimaginable just 30 years ago. Our efforts resulted in a plan with a wildly ambitious set of recovery criteria and wish-list of actions. I still recall, though, the stimulating discussions, the careful analysis, and the many questions asked as we attempted to chart an effective course of action. To this day, the plan, however outdated, continues to provide the underpinning for valuable recovery activities.

These small, weasel-like predators once occurred across a large area of the American West wherever prairie dogs occurred. Because ferrets rely on prairie dogs for food and shelter, their historical fate was to decline simultaneously with the majority of most prairie dog populations that were displaced by farming, removed to limit grazing competition with introduced domestic livestock, or devastated by sylvatic plague, a disease that was inadvertently introduced from overseas via flea-infested rats.

In 1979, the black-footed ferret was feared to be extinct. Fortunately, this presumption proved wrong in 1981 when a small population was discovered on a ranch near Meeteetse, Wyoming. Tragically, the wild population succumbed to disease a few years later, but not before biologists had taken

18 ferrets into captivity in an effort to save the species. Those remaining individuals formed the basis of a successful captive-breeding program that has brought the species back from the brink. This past year was a momentous year for the species—with 1,000 ferrets in the wild and 300 more in captivity, the Black-footed Ferret Recovery Program celebrated the 30th Anniversary of the species rediscovery and the 20th Anniversary of their successful return to the wild.

The recovery program is supported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center in northern Colorado and the National Zoo's Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, as well as zoological institutions in Colorado Springs, Phoenix, Louisville, and Toronto.



A black-footed ferret is released on a black-tail prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) colony in New Mexico.

Photo Credit: Kimberly Tamkun, USFWS

These facilities will continue to husband, breed, and raise captive ferrets, and provide excess animals (approximately 150-250) for annual reintroduction efforts. These efforts have been ongoing for more than 20 years and continue to improve.

In addition to the zoological community, the recovery team includes partners from state and federal agencies, tribal entities, private landowners, and many non-governmental organizations. These partners have supported the Service in addressing various challenges to securing this species in the wild, locating adequate prairie dog populations sufficient for supporting several thousand black-footed ferrets, and reintroducing the species in the wild at 20 sites in 8 western states, Mexico, and Canada. Although some of these wild ferret populations have been threatened by sylvatic plague, management efforts designed to reduce flea disease vectors at these sites are in place. Additionally, efforts to develop and use a sylvatic plague vaccine to protect both black-footed ferrets and prairie dogs are currently underway. Vaccine development efforts will continue and will be field tested over the next few years.

Still, the most formidable challenge facing ferret recovery is whether

suitable prairie dog habitat will be available to achieve the objectives of establishing enough multiple, viable populations of black-footed ferrets in the wild. Reintroduced populations will continue to be managed as new sites are prepared for future release efforts, and management practices to conserve prairie dogs in some areas will be refined. Incentives initiatives will also be explored in an effort to increase private landowner participation in black-footed ferret recovery. Large prairie dog complexes of at least a few thousand acres are necessary to support ferret populations of at

least 30 breeding adults; without the support of private landowners, many prairie dog complexes will remain too small and fragmented to sustain ferret populations sufficient in size to contribute to recovery goals. Black-footed ferret recovery can lead to purposeful prairie dog management that coexists with economically viable ranching operations, and further lead to the conservation of other species that utilize similar habitats. Burrowing owls, ferruginous hawks, golden eagles, mountain plovers, swift fox, and other species at risk can benefit from black-footed ferret recovery efforts.

Black-footed ferret recovery has provided predictable, incremental gains over the past few decades and is poised to reach its final goal with continued, focused efforts by its many supporters. While the road to recovery has been a long one – with twists and turns, a few detours, and some welcomed surprises – the recovery of this species could be just around the corner.

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Larry and Bette Haverfield and Gordon and Martha Barnhart have contributed to black-footed ferret recovery by welcoming the release of ferrets on their joint 10,000 acre-complex of rangeland.



Photo Credit: Pete Gober, USFWS