

Black-footed Ferret

Mustela nigripes



Black-footed ferret peeks out of a burrow / Mike Lockhart, USFWS

Species Description

The black-footed ferret (BFF) (*Mustela nigripes*) is a medium-sized mustelid (a member of the weasel family), typically weighing 1.4 to 2.5 pounds and measuring 19 to 24 inches in total length, including a 5 to 6 inch tail. It is a slender, wiry, animal with black feet, a black face mask, and a black-tipped tail. Its short, sleek fur is a beige-buff color, lighter on the belly and nearly white on the forehead, muzzle, and throat. Black-footed ferrets have short legs with large front paws, and claws developed for digging. The BFF's large ears and eyes suggest it has acute hearing and sight, but smell may be its most important sense for hunting prey underground in the dark. Its large skull and strong jaw and teeth are adapted for eating meat.



Black-footed ferret in the wild
Kimberly Fraser, USFWS

Specialization

Black-footed ferrets are highly specialized predators that depend upon prairie dogs (*Cynomys spp.*) for survival. Prairie dogs make up more than 90% of the BFF's diet. Prairie dog burrows provide BFFs with suitable dens to raise their young as well as escape predators and harsh weather. In the past, this dependence was a good survival strategy because prairie dogs were plentiful. However, in the modern era, as human activities and disease decimated prairie dog populations, this unique survival strategy proved detrimental to BFF survival.

Habitat & Range

Black-footed ferrets depend exclusively on prairie dog burrows for shelter. Historically, BFF habitat coincided with habitats of black-tailed prairie dog (*C. ludovicianus*), Gunnison's prairie dog (*C. gunnisoni*), and white-tailed prairie dog (*C. leucurus*). The BFF is the only ferret species native to the Americas. Its historical range spanned much of western North America's intermountain and prairie grasslands, extending from Canada to Mexico. BFFs have been reintroduced in the wild at 30 sites across 8 states, Canada, and Mexico.



Black-footed ferret in preconditioning pens / USFWS

Reproduction

The mating season for BFFs is March-April. Gestation time is 41 to 43 days, and kits are born May through June. Litter sizes are typically three to five kits. Kits are born blind and helpless, staying below ground until they are about two months old. At this age BFF mothers move their litters to various burrows within their home range and begin to take them on hunting forays. At approximately 90 days of age, kits reach 90% of their adult size, and are adept at killing prairie dogs.



Learning to hunt a prairie dog
Mike Lockhart, USFWS



Black-footed ferret newborn kit / Kimberly Fraser, USFWS

Threats

Despite significant recovery successes, the BFF remains one of the most endangered mammals in North America. The primary reasons the species remains at risk are the same that nearly caused the animal's extinction: disease, loss of habitat, and related declines in prey. Conversion of native grasslands to agricultural land, widespread prairie dog eradication programs, and fatal, non-native diseases, such as plague, have reduced BFF populations to less than 2% of their original range. Much of the remaining habitat is now fragmented, with prairie dog towns separated by expanses of agricultural land and other human developments.

Legal Status Under the Endangered Species Act

Since March 11, 1967, BFFs have been listed as endangered across their entire range, with the exception of several reintroduced populations designated as experimental. In 2014, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) completed a five-year review of the



Black-footed ferret on the Soapstone Prairie / Bruce Gill

BFF's status. This review found that this species continues to warrant federal endangered status.

Population Numbers and Recovery Efforts

Black-footed ferrets once numbered in the tens of thousands, but due to a combination of human-induced threats, they were believed to be extinct twice in the 20th century. In 1981, a small population of the species was rediscovered in Meeteetse, Wyoming. However, by 1986, due to disease, only eighteen individuals were known to exist in this isolated wild population. Scientists captured these remaining BFFs and they became the foundation for a successful captive breeding and reintroduction program that continues today.

This Service-led BFF program has annually released BFFs into the wild at a number of different reintroduction sites across the West. Currently, there are approximately 280 BFFs living at captive breeding facilities. These recovery efforts are managed by the Service's National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center in northern Colorado and partners in multiple states.

Recovery Partners

Despite the many threats facing BFFs, wildlife managers believe recovery of the species is attainable. There are more than 50 federal, state, tribal and

non-governmental agencies working together in a recovery team effort to conserve this native species. Due to these partnerships, BFF recovery goals are within reach.

Information

To learn more about the BFF and conservation efforts on behalf of the species please contact: The National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center at (970) 897-2730.

Or visit the following sites:
Black-footed Ferret Recovery Program: www.blackfootedferret.org

National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/FerretCenter/

The Service's ECOS page: <http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.action?spcode=A004>



Black-footed ferret release into the wild
USFWS

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