



# NEWS

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## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

### Office of the Secretary

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## **ENDANGERED BLACK-FOOTED FERRETS RETURN TO MEXICO**

October 2: Today, more than two dozen endangered black-footed ferrets from Arizona, Wyoming, and Ontario, Canada, made wildlife conservation history by being the first of their species to return to Mexico. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico released the ferrets in the vicinity of Janos, Chihuahua, Mexico, located roughly 140 miles southwest of El Paso, Texas. The ferrets released in Mexico were born in captivity at the following breeding facilities: the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center near Laramie, Wyoming; the Phoenix Zoo in Phoenix, Arizona; and the Toronto Zoo in Ontario, Canada.

“Today we celebrate a truly historic moment in wildlife conservation history,” said Interior Secretary Gale Norton. “This marks the first time the nation’s of North America have come together to restore a species that has disappeared from Mexico. It is an incredible comeback story, made especially remarkable given that just a little over 20 years ago, most people thought the black-footed ferret was extinct.”

Black-footed ferrets are long, slender-bodied animals characterized by a brownish-black mask across the face, a brownish head, black feet and legs, and a black tip on the tail. Their historic range is believed to have extended from Canada to Mexico, along the great plains, grasslands, and shrub lands of the mid-continent, but they are no longer believed to exist in Mexico.

The black-footed ferret is North America’s only native ferret. The species suffered tremendous declines in numbers as a result of rural development and disease, which impacted not only black-footed ferrets, but also prairie dogs, a species vital to their survival.

The black-footed ferret population crashed in 1974 and its last known member died in captivity in 1979. At that point, the species was thought to be extinct, until a rancher accidentally discovered a colony of about 120 ferrets near Meeteetse, Wyoming. Biologists were thrilled with this second chance to rescue the species from extinction, but hope dimmed when the newly discovered population succumbed to disease. In 1987, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department captured the last 18 remaining members of the colony in a last ditch effort to save the species through captive breeding.

In 1996, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service established a Black-footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team, a multi-agency team that includes representatives from federal and state governments, Native American tribes, zoos, and non-profit organizations. The team’s 27 members combined expertise and resources for the overall

recovery of the species. The team has helped plan the Mexico release.

Following a tremendous collaborative effort, biologists have realized extraordinary success with captive breeding. From the last 18 ferrets, they have bred hundreds. Today, there are 700 black-footed ferrets in existence, with about half of those living in the wild.

Now a new struggle is underway: the re-establishment of wild populations. Establishing self-sustaining wild populations has not been easy. One of the factors slowing recovery efforts is the scarcity of sufficiently large, disease-free populations of prairie dogs. Black-footed ferrets prey almost exclusively on prairie dogs and utilize prairie dog burrows as their dens. Biologists believe the Janos, Mexico site offers one of the best opportunities to re-establish another self-sustaining population of black-footed ferrets because it contains the largest remaining disease-free prairie dog colony in North America. There are an estimated 500,000 prairie dogs in the Janos area. By returning the black-footed ferret to Janos, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico are not only restoring a part of the natural ecology of the area; they are also restoring a part of Mexico's natural heritage.

By November 2001, this re-establishment effort plans to release about 100 black-footed ferrets at the site. The breeding facilities contributing black-footed ferrets for this effort are: the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center, Laramie, Wyoming; the Turner Endangered Species Fund breeding facility in Raton, New Mexico; the National Zoological Park's Conservation and Research Center, Front Royal, Virginia; the Phoenix Zoo, Phoenix, Arizona; the Toronto Zoo, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; and the Louisville Zoological Gardens, Louisville, Kentucky. Depending on how these ferrets fare, future releases may be considered.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 94-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 535 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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