

Black-footed Ferret

Mustela nigripes



Black-footed ferret / USFWS

Species Description

The black-footed ferret (*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 yellow-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 ferret's large ears and eyes suggest it has acute hearing and sight, but smell is likely 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 kits / USFWS

Specialization

The black-footed ferret is a highly specialized predator that depends upon prairie dogs for survival. Prairie dogs (*Cynomys spp.*) make up more than 90% of the black-footed ferret's diet, and prairie dog burrows provide ferrets with suitable dens to raise their young, as well as a means to escape from predators and harsh weather. In the evolutionary past, this dependence was a very good survival strategy because prairie dogs were plentiful. However, in the modern era, as human activities and disease have decimated prairie dog populations, this unique survival strategy has proven detrimental to ferret survival.

Habitat & Range

The black-footed ferret depends exclusively on prairie dog burrows for shelter. Historically, ferret habitat largely coincided with the habitats of the black-tailed prairie dog (*C. ludovicianus*), Gunnison's prairie dog (*C. gunnisoni*), and the white-tailed prairie dog (*C. leucurus*). The black-footed ferret is the only ferret species native to the Americas. Its historic range spanned much of western North America's intermountain and prairie



Black-footed ferret in pre-conditioning pen / USFWS

grasslands, extending from Canada to Mexico. The species now exists in the wild at 16 reintroduction sites across 8 states, Canada, and Mexico (3 of the 19 original reintroduction sites no longer support ferret populations due to sylvatic plague).

Reproduction

Mating Season: March -April.

Gestation: 41 to 43 days. Kits are born May through June.

Litter size: Typically 3 to 4 kits. Kits are born blind and helpless, and stay below ground until they are about 2 months old. At this age, mother

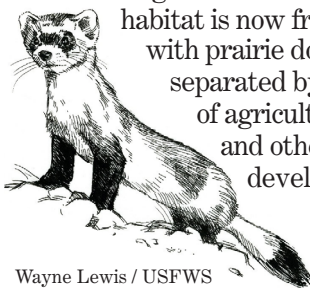


Dean Biggins / USFWS

ferrets move their litters to various burrows within their home range, and begin to take them on hunting forays. At 90 days of age, kits reach 90% of their adult size, and are able to kill prairie dogs.

Threats

Despite significant recovery successes, the black-footed ferret remains one of the most endangered animals in the world. The primary reasons the species remains at risk are the same that nearly caused the animal's extinction: loss of habitat and prey. Conversion of native grasslands to agricultural land, widespread prairie dog eradication programs, and fatal, non-native diseases have reduced ferret habitat to less than two percent of its original range. The remaining



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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, the black-footed ferret has been listed as endangered across its entire range, with the exception of several reintroduced populations designated as experimental. In November 2008, the U.S. Fish and

Wildlife Service (Service) completed a 5-year review of black-footed ferret recovery efforts. This review found that the species remains one of the most endangered mammals in the United States, and continues to warrant endangered status.

Population Numbers and Recovery Efforts

Black-footed ferrets once numbered in the tens of thousands, but a combination of human-induced threats brought them to the brink of extinction in the 20th century. In fact, the species was twice believed by scientists to be extinct. In 1986, only eighteen individuals were known to exist in the entire world. Scientists captured these ferrets, which provided the foundation for a successful breeding and reintroduction program. As of 2011, this U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service-led program has since produced more than 7,000 kits in captivity, more than 2,600 of which have been reintroduced into their natural habitat. It is estimated that as a result of these efforts there are currently more than 1,000 black-footed ferrets in the wild, and another 280 living in breeding facilities. These recovery efforts are managed primarily by the National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center near Carr, CO (<http://www.blackfootedferret.org/>).

Despite the radically-altered environment facing reintroduced

ferrets today, scientists believe that the recovery of the species is within reach. All of the components necessary to achieve recovery have been identified, and have proven operationally successful in the field. That said, there is still much work to be done, and many potentially complicating variables still exist. However, if recovery efforts continue at the current pace and do not experience significant setbacks, in time the Service and its partners expect to recover the black-footed ferret.



Lockhart / USFWS

More Information

To learn more about the black-footed ferret and conservation efforts on behalf of the species, please visit the following sites: The Black-footed Ferret Recovery Program: <http://www.blackfootedferret.org/> The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's ECOS page: <http://ecos.fws.gov/speciesProfile/profile/speciesProfile.ode=A004>

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