



Contact

Lynda Lambert, Arizona Game and Fish Department, (623) 236-7203
Linda Hardwick, Phoenix Zoo, (602) 663-3254
Jeff Humphrey, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (602) 242-0524 x222

NEWS RELEASE

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Future for Arizona's endangered black-footed ferrets shines thanks to recovery efforts

PHOENIX — The future for Arizona's endangered black-footed ferrets looks promising with two new exciting developments: the opening of a new breeding facility for the species at the Phoenix Zoo and the best-ever population survey results.

Fourteen years after they were first reintroduced to the state, black-footed ferret surveys conducted this fall by the Arizona Game and Fish Department show a record 96 animals in the Aubrey Valley population located outside of Seligman, Ariz. Because not all ferrets were captured and included in the fall survey count, the number of animals identified during the survey is a minimum population estimate, and the actual population could be larger.

Not only is the number of ferrets identified a record high for Arizona's population, but it also exceeds the state's objective that needs to be met in order for the species to be "downlisted" from endangered to threatened on the endangered species list. "Downlisting" means that the species has recovered to a point where its classification on the Endangered Species List has improved. All states with black-footed ferret populations are given state-specific recovery guidelines that lead to a larger national recovery effort. The national recovery guidelines must be met before "downlisting" the species can be considered.

"It's a tremendous milestone for Arizona to surpass one of the draft guidelines for recovering black-footed ferrets and do its part to contribute to the larger national conservation effort," says Larry Voyles, director of the Arizona Game and Fish Department. "The ultimate measure of success for any endangered species recovery program is when our efforts are so successful that a species can be removed from the endangered species list. The growth of Arizona's wild black-footed ferret population moves us closer to that ultimate goal, and with support from the Phoenix Zoo and the Heritage Fund, we will continue to work towards a full recovery for the species."

Aiding the recovery of the species is the opening of the new Black-Footed Ferret Breeding Center at the Phoenix Zoo. With help from a generous donation from the Arthur L. "Bud" and Elaine V. Johnson Foundation, this new facility will enable the Phoenix Zoo to continue their successful breeding program.

The Phoenix Zoo has been an active participant in the conservation and reintroduction of black-footed ferrets since the opening of their first breeding facility in 1992. As one of only six

facilities in the world that participate in the species' breeding program, the Phoenix Zoo has produced nearly 400 ferrets, 85 of which have been released in the Aubrey Valley.

In 2008, the zoo's black-footed ferret breeding program went on hiatus, as the ferret breeding facility was located in the footprint of the orangutan exhibit expansion. The zoo was concerned about the impact their absence would have on the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Black-footed Ferret Species Survival Plan® and the federal recovery program.

"We worked extremely hard across zoo departments to make plans and raise funds for a new breeding center," says Ruth Allard, executive vice president of conservation and visitor experiences for the Phoenix Zoo. "Just over two years later now, we were joined today by representatives from state and federal wildlife agencies in dedicating the new black-footed ferret breeding center. We trust that our new ferrets will settle in and breed well in this beautiful new building dedicated to the preservation of their species in the wilds of North America."

The new building is located just behind the Johnson Foundation Conservation Center.

In addition to the zoo's group of nine ferrets retired from the breeding program, an additional 21 black-footed ferrets have been welcomed to the zoo's collection. Seven males and 14 females traveled from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center in Carr, Colo. All of the new males and eight of the females make up the zoo's breeding population, while six of the new females have joined our existing group of nine ferrets retired from the breeding program. The "retirees" cannot be released to the wild, usually for health reasons, so they will live out their remaining years in the zoo's care.

"Endangered species recovery works. It's a long haul up a slippery slope, but the Phoenix Zoo's breeding program and Arizona Game and Fish's steadfast reintroduction and monitoring efforts provide the traction needed to restore viable ferret populations. The offspring of these animals are thriving where the species once was locally extinct," says Pete Gober, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's black-footed ferret recovery coordinator.

The draft recovery plan for black-footed ferrets suggests that 74 animals are needed in the wild in Arizona to change the species' classification from endangered to threatened. The draft plan is due out soon for public comment. The plan also suggests that Arizona needs 148 animals living in the wild as part of the national recovery effort in order for the species to be removed entirely from the Endangered Species List.

Game and Fish's black-footed ferret program is supported by the Heritage Fund, a voter-passed initiative that provides funding for wildlife conservation through Arizona Lottery revenue.

Biologists feared the black-footed ferret was extinct in the late 1970s, but then discovered approximately 120 of the animals in Wyoming in the mid-1980s. In 1985, after two disease outbreaks had killed nearly all of the remaining ferrets, the last 18 individuals were captured to start a breeding program. The descendants of these 18 ferrets have now been introduced into 19 reintroduction sites in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, including Aubrey Valley. Before reintroduction, the last black-footed ferret in Arizona was found in 1931 in an area between Williams and Flagstaff.

Black-footed ferrets are related to weasels. While they resemble domestic pet ferrets, black-footed ferrets are a different species and are the only ferret native to North America. They can grow to be up to 2 feet long and can weigh up to 2 ½ pounds. One ferret can give birth to three to five kits each year.

The Arizona black-footed ferret reintroduction program is a joint effort of the Arizona Game and Fish Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Phoenix Zoo, Hualapai Nation, Navajo Nation, Arizona State Land Department and the Cholla Cattle Company.

Note to media: Interviews and photos and video of black-footed ferrets are available by calling Game and Fish Public Information Officer Lynda Lambert at (623) 236-7203 or Phoenix Zoo Public Relations Manager Linda Hardwick at (602) 914-4363.