

Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge News

Black-footed Ferret Overview and Reintroduction Update - October 5, 2015



Photo Credit: Mike Lockhart/USFWS

Overview

The black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) is the most endangered mammal in North America. Once found across the Great Plains from southern Canada to northern Mexico, populations of ferrets declined by 98% in the 1900s due to habitat loss and disease. As prairie dogs make up about 90% of the ferret's diet, a national effort to eradicate prairie dogs also harmed the ferrets. In 1967, ferrets were listed as endangered under a precursor to the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

By 1979, black-footed ferrets were thought to be globally extinct until a ranch dog named Shep brought a dead ferret to his owners John and Lucille Hogg in 1981. Wildlife officials were

notified and Meeteetse, Wyoming, became the birthplace of black-footed ferret recovery. Initially, these animals were left on the ranch where they were monitored and their biology was studied. Then, a disease outbreak caused the ferret population to plummet to 18 individuals. The remaining ferrets were trapped and a captive breeding program began.

Recovery Efforts

Since 1991, the breeding program has annually released ferrets into the wild at a number of different reintroduction sites across the west. Currently there are 280. The recovery efforts are managed primarily by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center near Carr,

Colorado. The Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and zoos in Colorado Springs, Phoenix, Louisville, and Toronto have captive breeding programs as well.

Preconditioning and Reintroduction into the Wild

Before being released into the wild, ferrets are preconditioned by living in outdoor pens for at least 30 days where they are exposed to a natural burrow system and encounter live prairie dogs. Most preconditioning is conducted at the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center.

Reintroduction efforts began in 1991 with the release of 49 ferrets in Shirley Basin, Wyoming. Since then, ferrets

were successfully released at sites first in Montana and South Dakota, and later in Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona, Kansas, and Saskatchewan, Canada. Several reintroduced ferrets gave birth in the wild and biologists plan to release more ferrets into these areas.

Refuge Reintroduction

The Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) was selected as a reintroduction site for black-footed ferrets. The site provides ideal habitat and prey base because of its healthy expanse of shortgrass prairie and abundant black-tailed prairie dog colonies.

Ferrets were reintroduced in the to the Refuge on October 5, 2015 into prairie dog burrows across more than 1,300 acres in the northeast portion of the Refuge. These areas have been dusted for sylvatic plague for the past two years to prevent any pathway of disease. Prior to release, each ferret had transponder chips inserted just below the skin to uniquely identify the animal.

Refuge biologists will monitor ferrets at night by spotlighting: using high-powered lights to search for their emerald eyeshine (reflection of the spotlight in their eyes). After locating a ferret, a ring reader is placed over the burrow entrance to read its transponder chip and help biologists monitor the ferret's movements, behavior, and overall health.

An exhibit featuring two live ferrets is located adjacent to the Visitor Center. This free exhibit includes a one-of-a-kind indoor and outdoor area for the ferrets. The outdoor area is open sunrise to sunset and the indoor exhibit is open Wednesday through Sunday from 9:00 am – 4:00 pm. The ferret exhibit can be accessed from the Visitor Center parking lot or the Legacy Trail just off the Visitor Center back patio.

Background

Black-footed ferrets are members of the weasel family and are related to minks, badgers, wolverines, and domestic ferrets. They are the only ferrets native to North America and are a different species than ferrets found in pet stores.

Ferrets weigh 1.5 to 2.5 pounds and measure 18 to 24 inches in length, including a 5 to 6 inch tail. Males and females look alike, though males are slightly larger. Ferrets live 1 to 3 years in the wild.

Black-footed ferrets are slender animals with black feet, a black face mask, and a black-tipped tail. Their short, sleek fur is yellow-brown, lighter on the belly and nearly white on the forehead, muzzle, and throat. They have short legs with large front paws and claws for digging. Their large ears and eyes give them keen hearing and sight, but smell is likely the most important sense for hunting prey at night.

Habitat, Diet and Behavior

Black-footed ferrets spend most of their time underground, living and raising their young in prairie dog burrows. They are nocturnal, leaving their burrows at night to hunt prairie dogs. Black-footed ferrets eat, on average, one prairie dog every three days and are considered obligate carnivores of prairie dogs, which means that there is an unbreakable link between their main food source and their health. However, they will eat ground squirrels, mice, other rodents, rabbits, and birds on occasion.

Black-footed ferrets are solitary animals except during mating season and when mothers are raising their young. They have a variety of vocalizations, including chatters, chuckles, barks, and hisses. Young ferrets are playful and may be seen “dancing” above ground.

Reproduction

The breeding season begins in late March and continues through April. Four or five kits are born in May or June and stay in their burrow until they are six weeks old. Mothers nurse the kits until they emerge aboveground, usually in July. At that time, females begin separating the siblings into different burrows. From August through early September the kits become increasingly solitary and by early October they are able to care for themselves.