



BLACK-FOOTED FERRET
RECOVERY IMPLEMENTATION
TEAM

GR8 2 C U Back BFF

(Great to See You Back Black-footed Ferret)

Black-footed ferrets are long, slender-bodied animals.

They have a brownish head, black face mask, black feet, and a black-tipped tail. Their short, buff-colored fur is lighter on the underside of their bodies. The ferrets' color and markings blend with their grassland home.

The black-footed ferret is a member of the weasel family and a close relative of mink, martens, badgers, pole cats, and otters. The black-footed ferret is the only ferret species native to North America. It is also one of the rarest species on Earth.

There were probably never enormous numbers of black-footed ferrets. Naturalists John Audubon and James Bachman first saw them in 1851. Black-footed ferrets were not seen again for 25 years and many people doubted their existence. In the late 1800s, they lived throughout the Great Plains, from Mexico to southern Canada. Where prairie dogs were found, so were black-footed ferrets.

Black-footed ferrets depend on prairie dogs for survival. They eat mostly prairie dogs and live in prairie dog burrows. Ferrets cannot dig their own burrows for shelter. Their dependence on prairie dogs almost led to their demise.

Since the early 1900s, large portions of prairie were converted to farmland. More recently, prairie has been used for urban development. This resulted in a loss of habitat for many species, including ferrets. Historically and currently, people poison prairie dogs for a variety of reasons, disrupting the ecosystem and eliminating food and shelter for black-footed ferrets.

Disease is also a continuous threat to ferret survival. Canine distemper, a naturally occurring disease, is fatal to ferrets. Outbreaks of sylvatic plague, a disease introduced to North America, periodically wipes out populations of both prairie dogs and black footed ferrets.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the black-footed ferret as endangered in 1967. This was before the Endangered Species Act was passed in 1973! Endangered means a species is in danger of becoming extinct in all or a significant portion of its range. By the 1970s, the only known population of ferrets was found in South Dakota. It soon disappeared.

People thought that black-footed ferrets were extinct until a small population was found in Wyoming in 1981. The last 18 ferrets were taken from the wild to start a captive breeding program. The goal of the program was to stabilize the black-footed ferret population at 280 breeding adults in captivity and to return young ferrets to the wild. The breeding population of ferrets was divided so that one catastrophic event would not kill off the entire species. Black-footed ferrets are now bred at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center, Louisville Zoo, Toronto Zoo, Phoenix Zoo, Smithsonian's Conservation & Research Center, and Cheyenne Mountain Zoo.

Scientists hope to establish at least ten populations of black-footed ferrets in their natural habitat. About 200 to 220 black-footed ferret kits are released into the wild each year. There are release sites in Arizona, Colorado, Montana, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming, New Mexico, Kansas, and Mexico. Approximately 500 to 800 ferrets now live in the wild!

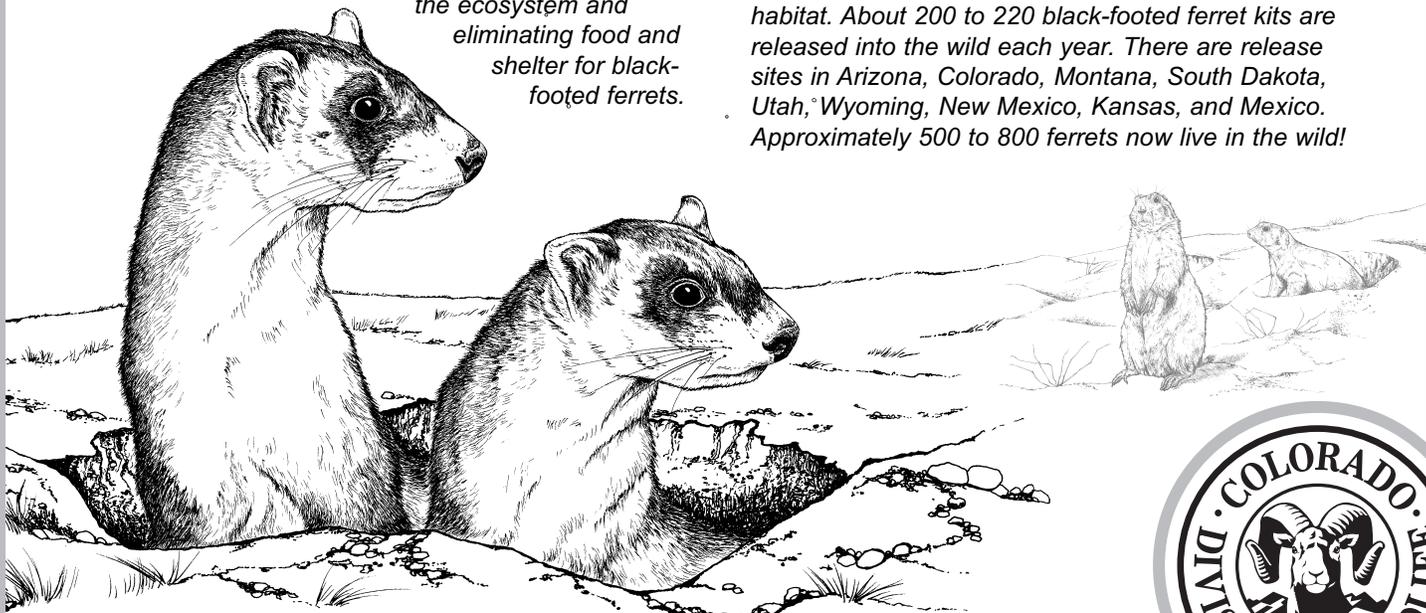


Illustration by Helen Zane Jensen, ©2009

