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Black Footed Ferret

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BLACK FOOTED FERRET



South Dakota Cooperative Extension Service
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South Dakota Department of Game, Fish, & Parks
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BLACK FOOTED FERRET

The black-footed ferret may be the rarest mammal in North America. It was first described in 1851, but was not reported again for 25 years. Ever since then, the ferret has been seen only on rare occasions, and little is known of its life history and ecological requirements.

Description

The black-footed ferret is a mink sized member of the weasel family, and is the only ferret native to North America. It is identified by its distinct black mask, black feet, and black-tipped tail which contrast with its tan to yellowish back and sides and whitish underparts. It weighs 1½ to 3 pounds, and the male is usually larger than the female.

The ferret's nearest living relative is the Old World Siberian ferret or polecat.

The European (or domestic) ferret is another close relative, and it is often confused with the black-footed ferret. The European ferret was imported to the United States for rat control and for use in hunting, and now it is a common laboratory and pet store animal.

Distribution and abundance

The black-footed ferret has apparently never been abundant. Even most early naturalists considered them rare. Plains Indians used the ferret during religious ceremonies, which suggests rarity. Stuffed ferrets were used in medicine bundles, and valued tobacco pouches were made from the ferret skins.

Although the past status of the black-footed ferret is unclear, the lack of early sightings may have been directly related to the fact that much of the Great Plains region was not occupied by man prior to this century, and

it is conceivable that even if the ferret were common, there would have been little chance of its coming in contact with humans.

Another reason for lack of sightings is the ferret's secretive and nocturnal habits.

Ferrets restrict their above ground activity to nighttime and early morning periods, and it is very likely that the casual observer, farmer, or rancher would not detect or identify the animal.

The original range of the black-footed ferret corresponded closely to that of the prairie dog. Ferrets have been reported from the Great Plains region, from the Canadian prairie provinces south to the west Texas plains, and from east of the 100th meridian to the mountain basins of Utah and Arizona.

The present distribution of the black-footed ferret is uncertain. Its present range seems considerably reduced from its original size. Sightings from several areas, however, suggest that remnant populations may still exist in South Dakota and some other plains states.

Most of the recent sightings and studies have been in South Dakota where the "re-discovery" of ferrets occurred in 1964.

Before that time many people believed the ferret was extinct.

Before 1964 little was known of the ferret's life history and ecology.

Factors which caused the decimation of ferret populations were related to habitat destruction caused by prairie dog control programs and agricultural land-use changes. The probable causes are not totally substantiated.

Life history

Black footed ferrets are nearly

always associated with prairie dogs.

Ferrets live in the prairie dog towns, raise their young in prairie dog burrows, and prey almost exclusively on the rodents. Rarely have ferrets been observed outside of dog towns.

The relationship between the ferret and prairie dog is unique. Although the ferret preys on the prairie dog, prairie dogs often seem little concerned about the presence of the ferret above ground.

In fact, rather than retreating, prairie dogs are often aggressive towards ferrets. They chase a ferret as it runs across the town; often they will run alongside it or jump in front of it.

This activity is probably meant only as harassment, for the prairie dog will retreat if the ferret stops and defends his position. Once the ferret has descended a burrow, the prairie dogs will kick dirt into the opening, and often they succeed in plugging the burrow entrance. The ferret, however, has no difficulty in digging through the plugged burrow at a later time.

The ferret is primarily nocturnal. Peaks of activity are usually 2-3 hours after sundown, and again during the early morning. The ferret hunts at night and may travel throughout the prairie dog town. Often it will run from burrow to burrow, descend for several minutes, and then continue to the next burrow. It kills prairie dogs in the burrow and may carry a dead prairie dog to another burrow where the ferret may remain for 1-2 days.

Occasionally, a ferret is active in the early daylight. Most often it will be seen in prairie dog burrows with only its head showing, or sunning on the edge of the burrow.

The ferret is most commonly seen during late summer or early fall, particularly if a family group is located. Ferrets are infrequently seen during other seasons. They do not hibernate, but they are less active during winter and spring months.

Ferrets breed in March and early April, and have a gestation period of 42-45 days. Litters of three to five young are born in a prairie dog burrow. At birth they resemble small mice, their eyes are closed, and their markings are not evident. The young remain in the burrow until late June or early July when the adult female begins bringing them above ground. At this time they are one half to three fourths adult size.

In early summer, young ferrets most often occupy one burrow. When the adult female makes a prairie dog kill, she moves her young to that burrow, and they will stay there for several days. As the season progresses, the mother locates them separately throughout the prairie dog town. At night she will go to each burrow occupied by young, and they then follow as she travels about the town. By early September the young are no longer dependent on the adult, and in late September or early October, most of the young leave the dog town and are not seen there again.

Adult males take no part in rearing the young. Observations of single animals suggest that

males live an isolated life except during the breeding season. Information on movement and dispersal is lacking, but ferrets have a tendency to reoccupy prairie dog towns that were previously inhabited. Several dog towns in South Dakota have been known to be inhabited by ferrets for 3-5 years.

Protection methods

Locating and observing is a difficult task. Consequently, the animal's current distribution has not been clearly defined. Also, because information is lacking on ferret home range and movement, management programs developed specifically for ferrets have not been extensive.

However, there have been several surveys and studies developed for protecting ferrets in areas scheduled for prairie dog control, or where other activities may jeopardize prairie dogs or ferrets.

During black-footed ferret surveys, observers search for sign characteristic of the ferret. Ferrets often dig in prairie dog burrows and form a trench-like tailing of loose dirt on top of the ground as dirt is repeatedly removed from the burrow. Although this sign is diagnostic of ferret activity, prairie dogs often destroy this sign within a few hours after sunrise.

Numerous plugged burrows may also indicate the presence of ferrets, but prairie dogs may

plug burrows as defense against other predators; occasionally, prairie dogs plug burrows for no known reason.

Ferret surveys are being conducted in many areas prior to prairie dog control. Easements have been granted to protect prairie dog towns where ferrets were known to occur in recent years. In addition, many federal and state agencies are developing prairie dog management plans that will retain adequate numbers of prairie dog towns as ferret habitat.

Toxicants (such as zinc phosphide) that do not exhibit secondary poisoning are now available for prairie dog control.

Researchers are now attempting to improve and refine methods to find ferrets. Domestic dogs are being trained to detect ferret scent, and methods for monitoring ferret movement and determining habitat needs of the animal are being developed. Hopefully, these techniques will provide additional information on the status and distribution of the ferret, and will improve methods for protecting this interesting, rare little animal.

Consulting editors are **Conrad Hillman** and **Raymond L. Linder**, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Photo by Con Hillman

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