

South Dakota Field Office

Mountain-Prairie Region

Black-footed Ferret

Mustela nigripes

Office Programs:

SDFO - Home
Endangered Species
Environmental Contaminants
Federal Project Reviews
Wetland Conservation
Ecological Services Responsibilities
Personnel
Contact Us
Current News
Other South Dakota Fish and Wildlife Service Offices
Wetland Mapper



FAMILY: Mustelidae

DESCRIPTION: The only ferret native to North America, the black-footed ferret averages about 18 to 24 inches long. This ferret has a tan body with black legs and feet, a black tip on the tail, and a black mask.

STATUS: The black-footed ferret was initially protected under the Endangered Species Protection Act in 1967 and later under the Endangered Species Act in 1973.

REASONS FOR CURRENT STATUS: Black-footed ferrets are endangered because of diseases, prairie dog eradication programs and much of the prairie habitat on which the ferrets depend has been plowed for crops. Prairie dogs, which are the ferrets' main food, have been reduced in number due to habitat loss, large-scale poisoning efforts, and disease. Prairie dogs have been killed because they eat grass used by livestock or winter wheat grown as a crop. Black-footed ferrets rely on prairie dogs for food and shelter. Scientists estimate that over 100 million acres of western rangelands were occupied by prairie dogs in the early 1900's. Much of this area was also occupied by black-footed ferrets.

REPRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT: Black-footed ferrets produce one to seven young (called kits) each year. Kits are born from May to June in burrows created by prairie-dogs and remain with the mother until about mid-August. Ferrets hunt mostly at night, so they are rarely seen. Predators such as owls, coyotes, badgers, foxes, and bobcats, in addition to diseases, are the main cause of death for wild ferrets.

RANGE: Historically black-footed ferrets occurred in the plains from Texas to southern Saskatchewan. Now black-footed ferrets are limited to seven captive populations and a few wild populations. The captive populations are located in [National Zoo](#), Washington D.C.; [Phoenix Zoo](#), Arizona; [Metropolitan Toronto Zoo](#), Ontario; [Cheyenne Mountain Zoological Park](#), Colorado; [Louisville Zoological Gardens](#), Kentucky, and the National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center, Wyoming. Of the reintroduced ferrets, only the

population in South Dakota appears to be self-sustaining. In the summer of 2001, about two dozen black-footed ferrets were reintroduced at a site in Mexico.

POPULATION LEVEL: As of December 2006, about 700 black-footed ferrets existed in the wild. The population in South Dakota accounted for 430 of the 700 individuals.

HABITAT: Black-footed ferrets are associated with mixed and shortgrass prairies but any prairie town of suitable size may be potential ferret habitat.

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS: The national goal is to establish 10 self-sustaining wild populations of black-footed ferrets in order to delist the ferret from endangered to threatened. However, habitat loss and widespread occurrence of sylvatic plague have limited the amount of suitable habitat for reintroducing black-footed ferrets.

Information summarized from:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1988. Black-footed ferret recovery plan. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Denver, Colorado. 154 pp.

Additional information on current numbers was obtained from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service species webpages.

[Black-footed Ferret Species Profile](#) Page

[Black-footed Ferret 5-Year Status Review: Summary and Evaluation, November 2008](#) (344 KB)

[National Black-footed Ferret Website](#)

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