

The State of the Black-Footed Ferret 2008

By Helen Tarbert, Black-Footed Ferret Committee Director

Some years ago, Pete Gober, now Project Leader of the Black-Footed Ferret (BFF) Recovery program, pronounced the black-footed ferret to be "out of E.R., into Intensive Care." Now, in the 27th year of the BFF recovery program, we might characterize this charming animal as out of Intensive Care, but not sufficiently recovered to be on its own. Today, there are approximately 850 to 1,000 black-footed ferrets in the wild. The goal is to establish ten populations at scattered locations totaling approximately 1,500 animals.

We are now in the season of expectation, and BFF breeding will continue until late June. As of April 29 of this year, 40 kits had been born and 34 were surviving. Of the 40 kits, 34 were born at the Toronto Zoo in Canada and six at the Phoenix Zoo. (An interesting sidelight is that the Toronto Zoo has again utilized an "Advance Photo Period" in 2008. The technique promotes early breeding by changing the lighting in December to create the illusion of spring.)

The Louisville Zoo is another breeding location, and was in the middle of its breeding season in April. The zoo has 16 breeding females, of which 12 were being paired with the potential to produce 12 litters. In late April, a curator reported that the first litter was due "at any time, and the second around the middle of May."

The Cheyenne Zoo in Colorado began this year's breeding around the middle of April, with the first litter due in late May or early June. The zoo has 10 males and 13 females, and is characterized by the lead conservation keeper as "a stronghold of the captive breeding program." Twenty to 30 kits are produced in an average year at this facility, and a new exhibit will be opening this year. The breeding facility itself is off the display area to provide quiet and relieve stress, but some visitors are allowed. Educational tours must be arranged in advance.

Another Colorado breeding location, the recovery headquarters near Carr, Colo., has the largest BFF population and expected its first new litter in 2008 on or about May 4. (Of interest is the fact that all of the 20-year-old wooden cages at this facility have been replaced with cages made of stainless steel and composite plastic. The replacements were not required, however, and biologist Paul Marinari does not support a popular theory that wood cages allow the penetration of dangerous microorganisms). Unfortunately, plans for a visitor center at the facility have not yet materialized.

At the National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center near Front Royal, Va., only two females had been bred as of the end of April: the first on April 4 and 5, and the second on April 9 and 10. The first litter was expected on or about May 19. In 2007, 397 kits were born at this facility, making it the recovery program's fourth best year. The record year was 1998, when 452 babies were produced and 333 survived to weaning.

Some of the kits born at each breeding facility are kept for future breeding; the others are taken to a central facility where decisions are made as to where they will be released.

Additional Release Sites

A definite plus for the black-footed ferret recovery program is the addition of new release sites. Thanks to the efforts of Logan County rancher Larry Haverfield, black-footed ferrets can now be found in Kansas for the

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Baby Boots Update

Boots, the adopted black-footed ferret son of Super Hero Super Tonks and the infamous Ms. Isabella Gucci-Jones, has been touring the country as of late. He has made trips to all of the facilities that breed black-footed ferrets as well as several zoos to meet and greet his kin. He will be sending in photos soon of his adventures and some of the other BFFs. Stay tuned to the AFR for further updates.



first time in 50 years. Larry arranged for the release of 14 ferrets on his own and leased lands and refused to allow poisoning of the prairie dogs essential to their survival, despite suits by neighbors and being taken to court by county officials.* Other new release sites include Wind Cave National Park in the Black Hills of South Dakota, a Northern Cheyenne tribe in Montana near the Wyoming border, and Espee Ranch, west of Flagstaff, Ariz. (Ted Turner is still involved with the BFF recovery program, allowing ferrets to be released on his ranches.)

Biologists are now also more optimistic about future releases at Chihuahua, Mexico. The site has been highly rated because of a large prairie dog population, but severe drought has so far prevented successful colonization. At this juncture, however, prairie dog numbers seem to be increasing.

Looking to more northern latitudes, Dr. Graham Crawshaw, a senior veterinarian at the Toronto Zoo, reported plans to reintroduce ferrets into Canada at Grasslands National Park in Saskatchewan. As Dr. Crawshaw enthused, "We really love our ferrets." Unfortunately, planned releases last year were not realized. However, Paul Marinari, keeper of the studbook, hopes for additional sites to open.

Other Keys to BFF Recovery

Dr. JoGayle Howard, terogeniologist at the National Zoo, has declared: "Habitat! Habitat! Habitat! We can produce the ferrets." When you think habitat for black-footed ferrets, think prairie dog, the vital link to BFF recovery. Today, however, approximately 95 percent of the prairie dog towns have been destroyed. Moreover, even while the black-footed ferret is on the endan-

gered list, the poisoning of prairie dogs continues on both public and private lands. Sylvetic plague is also still a problem, though the disease is being addressed by ongoing vaccine trials in both captive and wild BFF habitats. Nutritional research is also ongoing.

Genetics are another important area of concern. An all-capitals headline should read: "JoGAYLE HOWARD RESUMES INVOLVEMENT WITH CRC PROGRAM!" JoGayle planned to inseminate four female BFFs sometime in May with semen that has been stored for approximately a decade. This project is important as a means to help minimize the loss of genetic diversity. Dr. Howard's past research on young males and her artificial insemination experiments have already resulted in significantly higher reproduction rates.

The Bottom Line for BFF Recovery

That brings us to the important question: What is the bottom line for ferret recovery? Significant pluses are already in place. An Educational Subcommittee is once again ready to provide needed organizational contacts and public education, and Paul Marinari was to have an assistant by the second week in June, allowing him to devote more time to his efforts on behalf of black-footed ferrets.

Nevertheless, there are still daunting hurdles. The BFF is still near the top of the list of endangered North American mammals. Right now, the greatest challenge to their recovery is to end the public hostility and systematic poisoning of the prairie dogs essential to their survival. In addition, more release sites, both public and private, must be found, and government funding must be increased.

Finally, what is our own responsibility, as champions of the domestic ferret? All of us who care about the wild cousins of our pets should show our concern by contacting government officials, conservation organizations, and zoos. We can also do the following:

- Circulate petitions against Prairie Dog poisoning.
- Tell zoos that publicity should not be reserved for "mega-vertebrates."
- Tell conservation groups with product lines that we want the BFF included.
- Have groups with which we're connected hold educational and fundraising events.

And let's underline that word, education. For us, that means learning all we can about the black-footed ferret. To help, the Conservation and Research Center is open to the public the first weekend of October for its Autumn Conservation Festival, and the black-footed ferret is only one of many fascinating exhibits. For more information check the zoo's website, nationalzoo@si.edu under "Activities and Events." Also, check out a recent CNN program, "Broken Government: Scorched Earth," which includes an interview with Mike Lockard at the BFF recovery headquarters. Then go to the Futures Channel for the brief film "Black-Footed Ferret," narrated largely by Paul Marinari.

Help make this the year we bring front-page fame and funding to the black-footed ferret.

** For a report on his case see the article by Ted Cable: "There's No Place Like a Home in Kansas for Prairie Dogs." You'll find it*

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BLACK-FOOTED FERRET TIMELINE

1851: The black-footed ferret is reported and described by John James Audubon. No one will report seeing a ferret again for another 26 years.

1916: The U.S. National Park Service is established.

1964: A female ferret and kits are found in Mellette County in western South Dakota. They are considered perhaps the last black-footed ferrets in the world.

1967: The black-footed ferret is put on the Endangered Species list.

1971: Executive Order 11643 is implemented, banning the use of poisons with secondary hazards on public lands.

1972: A drowned ferret is discovered in a watering tank in Wyoming. No others are found.

Nine South Dakota ferrets are captured and taken to Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Md. It is hoped that these ferrets will produce kits, but every litter is dead at birth.

1973: The Endangered Species Act is passed.

1979: The last Patuxent ferret dies. The black-footed ferret is declared extinct.

1981: September 25: A Wyoming ranch dog belonging to John and Lucille Hogg kills a black-footed ferret.

October 29: A live black-footed ferret is spotted near Meeteetse, Wyo. Conservationists and researchers begin an intensive search and study of wild ferrets.

1984: The Meeteetse population is 129 black-footed ferrets. Plans are made to begin a captive breeding program.

1985: Outbreaks of sylvatic plague and canine distemper nearly wipe out the Meeteetse ferrets.

August 27: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Wyoming Game and Fish Department decide to remove all known black-footed ferrets from their habitat in an effort to save the species. From October 1985 to September 1986, 17 ferrets are taken into captivity.

1986: The IUCN – World Conservation Union’s Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG) conducts a workshop to develop a recovery plan for captive breeding and reintroduction of black-footed ferrets.

1987: The last known ferret is captured at Meeteetse in February. These 18 captive black-footed ferrets are probably the rarest mammals on earth.

A captive breeding program is initiated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Wyoming Game and Fish Department, and the American Zoo and Aquarium Association.

Two litters of ferret kits are born at Sybille Wildlife Research and Conservation Education Center, Wyo., to “Becky” and “Jenny.” This brings the total number of black-footed ferrets in captivity to 25.

1988: In October, eight ferrets are flown to the National Zoological Park’s Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Va., to start a new breeding colony and to guard against catastrophic loss of the captive population.

In December, eight more ferrets are taken to the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha, Neb.

“Conservation Biology of the Black-Footed Ferret” (Seal et al.) is published.

The “Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Plan” is drafted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

1989: Seventy-two ferret kits are born at Sybille and six at Front Royal.

The total ferret population is 120.

1990: The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo in Colorado Springs, Colo., joins the captive breeding program.

1991: Shirley Basin in central Wyoming becomes the first black-footed ferret reintroduction site with the release of 49 juvenile ferrets.

A Species Survival Plan (SSP) is developed in cooperation with the American Zoo and Aquarium Association to manage the genetic and demographic needs of the captive ferret population.

The Louisville Zoological Garden in Louisville, Ky., and the Phoenix Zoo in Phoenix, Ariz., join the captive breeding program.

1972: Two litters of wild-born kits are reported in Shirley Basin, the first known kits born in the wild since the Meeteetse population was lost.

1993: Four wild-born litters are discovered in Shirley Basin.

The Toronto Zoo in Canada joins the captive breeding program.

1994: The Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in Montana and Badlands National Park, S.D., receive ferrets for reintroduction.

An outbreak of plague spreads throughout the Shirley Basin release site and further reintroductions are postponed. A total of 228 ferrets are released in Shirley Basin from 1991 to 1994. Small numbers of ferrets persist there today.

1995: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services assumes responsibility for managing the Sybille, Wyo., breeding facility and renames it the National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center.

Ferrets are found to be highly susceptible to direct contact with plague.

1996: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service establishes a Black-Footed

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in Defenders: the Conservation Magazine of Defenders of Wildlife, Spring 2008, Vol. 83, Issue 2, page 28.

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Ferret Recovery Implementation Team to help guide recovery efforts. The BFFRIT includes representatives from federal and state governments, Native American tribes, zoos, and conservation organizations.

The South Dakota ferret reintroduction effort expands onto the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands.

Arizona joins the reintroduction program by testing the use of onsite "preconditioning" pens for the first time at a release site in the Aubrey Valley in northwestern Arizona.

1997: Twenty-four onsite preconditioning pens are constructed by the U.S. Forest Service on the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands. 1997 is the first year that all ferrets destined for reintroduction are preconditioned before release.

A new reintroduction effort begins on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, Mont.

1998: The captive breeding program experiences its best year ever with a record 452 ferrets born and 339 surviving to weaning. Eighteen of the weaned young are produced in onsite pens in Arizona, an important milestone.

The number of ferrets available for reintroduction exceeds all previous years with approximately 210 kits released to the wild in Arizona, Montana and South Dakota.

The pen breeding program expands

with the addition of pen facilities built by the Turner Endangered Species Fund in New Mexico. Twenty pens are completed at a pending reintroduction site in northwest Colorado, and 20 pens are constructed at Bowdoin National Wildlife Refuge in Montana to support ongoing release efforts in Montana.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans for construction of a new breeding facility near Fort Collins, Colo., to replace the current Wyoming facility.

Perhaps the most important milestone in 1998 is the fact that for the first time since the black-footed ferret recovery program began, there are more ferrets in the wild than in captivity. To date, more than 2,600 ferrets have been produced in captivity.



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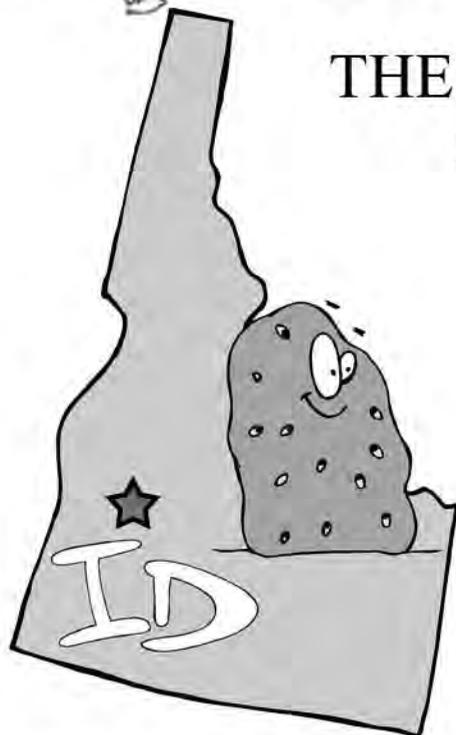
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