

BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

Mustela nigripes (Endangered Colorado, Federally)



A reintroduction plan for Colorado's black-footed ferrets is underway.

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CONSIDERED BY WILDLIFE biologists to be the rarest mammal in North America, black-footed ferrets are approximately 24 inches long from the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail.

These members of the weasel or mustelid family are often confused with long-tailed weasels or domestic European ferrets, but American black-footed ferrets can be identified by their distinctive black mask over the eyes, black markings on the legs extending to the shoulders and the black-tipped tails.

The predatory ferret is highly specialized for hunting prairie dogs and living in prairie dog burrows. Its original range coincides with the range of prairie dogs in North America and Colorado. The widespread practice of poisoning prairie dogs during the expansion era in the West was probably the major factor that put black-footed ferrets in their endangered status. Ferrets have also suffered from diseases such as canine distemper and plague.

Ferrets were thought to be extinct when the last known ones died in captivity in 1979. A new population was

discovered in September 1981 in Meeteetse, Wyo. This population later started to die off due to canine distemper and the last remaining 18 ferrets were captured and were the founders of a captive breeding population in 1985-86. By 2000, more than 3,000 ferrets have been produced by this program. Ferrets have been reintroduced into Wyoming, Montana, South Dakota, Arizona, Utah, Colorado and Mexico. South Dakota and Wyoming now both have a self-sustaining population of ferrets.

Federal and state agencies in northwest Colorado and northeast Utah have been cooperating on a ferret reintroduction program. Ferrets were released in Utah in the fall of 1999; releases have continued annually to the present. Colorado reintroduction efforts began in the fall of 2001; annual releases have been ongoing since that time. Reproduction has been documented in Utah and monitoring efforts in Colorado have documented persistence of reintroduced individuals. All indications are that this Colorado/Utah Reintroduction Area will support a small wild ferret population.