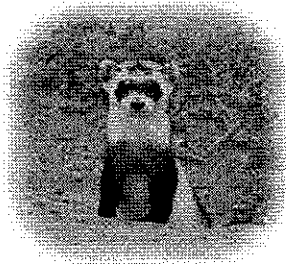


9L  
737  
225  
137  
2006



DEPARTMENT OF  
**NATURAL  
RESOURCES**



**Black-footed Ferret Reintroduction Summary  
For Colorado Legislators as per HB00-1314  
Prepared by the Colorado Division of Wildlife; 1/19/2006**

**Background**

The black-footed ferret is considered the rarest mammal in North America, one of the rarest in the world, and was one of the first species to be listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973.

The black-footed ferret (BFF) was close to extinction and at one point in time (the late 1970's and early 80's) was considered to be extinct until a small population was discovered in 1985 near Meeteetse, Wyoming. This small population was experiencing significant declines due to canine distemper and sylvatic plague. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) captured remaining wild individuals from Meeteetse for captive breeding and species preservation. Eighteen ferrets were captured in 1986 and 1987 and have become the seed population for all subsequent captive breeding and recovery efforts. The present captive population is the source for ferrets released in the wild. Colorado is one of several states involved with the recovery of BFF's.

The Colorado State Legislature approved the reintroduction of BFF's into Colorado on April 18, 2000 (HB1314). Annual fall releases of ferrets into Coyote Basin and Wolf Creek, Colorado (North of Rangely) began in 2001. 189 animals have been released from 2001-2005 into Wolf Creek. 8 BFF's were released in 2001 on the Colorado side of Coyote Basin. Due the fact that the majority of Coyote Basin is in Utah, BFF's in that area have been monitored and managed by Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR).

The reintroduction of BFF's into its former range in northwest Colorado and northeast Utah has been a cooperative effort between the Bureau of Land Management, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and UDWR.

Monitoring of ferrets, particularly in Wolf Creek, is extremely challenging. The Wolf Creek Management Area (WCMA) has unique issues with regards to monitoring due to rolling terrain dominated by heavy vegetation, predominantly sagebrush, and deeply entrenched arroyos. In addition, the WCMA is huge, containing approximately 20,000 acres of prairie dog habitat scattered within a 52,000 acre area. Management of the area by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) restricts travel to designated roads. The size, type of terrain, and limited access hampers the ability to thoroughly monitor ferret populations. In addition, ferrets are nocturnal and are rarely above ground. They reside in prairie dog burrows and are dependent upon prairie dogs as their food source. Typically, the primary means of monitoring ferrets is through spotlighting and snow-tracking.

**Goal**

To release sufficient numbers of black-footed ferrets into the WCMA to establish a pre-breeding population of at least 20 adult ferrets by the fifth breeding season following the 2001 release.

**Current Status**

Reproduction in the wild was confirmed for the first time in November of 2005 when a wild-born female was found in Wolf Creek. Minimum end-of-year (2005) population estimate was 13 (4 males, 8 females, 1 unknown). This number is considered a minimum as several additional ferrets were observed, but not confirmed, during the same time frame. This would indicate the population is nearing the goal of 20 pre-breeding individuals.

## **Reintroduction**

Reintroduction of BFF's into Colorado began in 2001 in two separate areas – Coyote Basin and Wolf Creek. To date, a total of 189 BFF's have been released into Wolf Creek and 8 into Coyote Basin. Reintroductions have occurred each fall since 2001 and in 2005, 19 individuals were released into Wolf Creek.

## **2005 Monitoring Activities**

- A 10 day intensive spotlighting effort (700 hours) was conducted in late August, 2005 to determine persistence of released ferrets and document if reproduction occurred.
- Spotlighting continued with a small field crew throughout the fall/early winter.
- Radio telemetry was utilized to monitor 11 of 19 released ferrets during the fall
- Short term survival of BFF's released in 2005 was monitored with a fall spotlighting effort and was determined to be 40%, a good survival rate for captive released ferrets. All released BFF's are captive reared, making initial mortality generally high due to lack of previous experience with predators.
- Working Dogs for Conservation was utilized in the spring of 2005 to conduct ferret searches by detecting burrows containing ferret scent. Two dogs, working separately, gave positive indication of ferrets on 36 different burrows; 8 of these burrows were confirmed by both dogs.
- Monitoring Results: Wolf Creek: Five individual ferrets were found during August spotlighting including three females released in 2004, one male released in 2003 that had moved 9 km, and one unidentified ferret. During November spotlighting, two additional ferrets were found. One was a three-year-old female, representing the longest-lived ferret found to date in Wolf Creek (life span of BFF's is only 4-5 years). The other was a wild-born female ferret, the first wild-born found in Wolf Creek thus documenting reproduction. Several additional ferrets were sighted during the August spotlighting but unconfirmed.

## **2005 Habitat Evaluation/Monitoring**

- Prairie dog transects were completed in the spring to determine habitat suitability for the fall release.
  - Transects indicated prairie dog populations were up 44% from 2004. 19,188 acres were surveyed. Of the total acres surveyed, 9,636 acres (50.2%) were classified as good habitat with an overall Ferret Family Rating (FFR) of 36.4, an increase over previous years. In comparison, the FFR was 20.4 in 2004 and 21.7 in 2003.
- Carnivore sampling was completed in August, 2005 for detection of plague, tularemia, and distemper. Nineteen coyotes were screened and presence of all 3 pathogens was found in the samples. The most prevalent pathogen noted was tularemia, which is common in Colorado rodents and, therefore, not surprising.

## **Upcoming Efforts - 2006**

- Habitat evaluation will be conducted in the spring of 2006 (prairie dog transects) in Wolf Creek. Habitat evaluation will also occur in the Little Snake Management Area. This area was slotted for receiving BFF's in the 1990's, but the prairie dog population experienced a large die off, necessitating postponement of a BFF release. Prairie dog populations seem to be recovering, and if monitoring indicates numbers are adequate, then BFF reintroduction into that area will again be considered.
- Post-release monitoring will continue utilizing spotlighting and winter snow-tracking.
- Disease monitoring will continue and the screening of small mammals is being considered.
- An allocation request will be made to USFWS for additional ferrets to be released in the fall of 2006.
- Pre-conditioning of ferrets for release in Colorado will occur in NW Colorado.