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## ***Black-Footed Ferret Fact Sheet (5/1/94)***

### **Black-Footed Ferret** (*Mustela nigripes*)

**Description:** The black-footed ferret is a small weasel-like animal with a black mask around its eyes and black legs and feet. It is between 18 and 22 inches long, including its tail. It weighs up to 2 1/2 pounds.

**Range:** Through captive breeding, the black-footed ferret once again occurs in the wild at Shirley Basin, Wyoming, where they were reintroduced first in 1991. The last known population in Meeteetse, Wyoming, succumbed to canine distemper. The survivors were removed to captivity. It is thought to have formerly ranged from Mexico to Canada through the western plains states.

**Habitat:** The black-footed ferret lives almost exclusively in prairie dog towns of the Great Plains. Prairie dog towns are a community network of prairie dog dens and tunnels that can be hundreds of acres. Black-footed ferrets also den in prairie dog burrows.

**Diet:** Prairie dogs, which are often equal or larger in size than the ferret, make up 90% of its diet. Its diet is occasionally supplemented with rabbits and rodents.

**Social Organization:** Black-footed ferrets are thought to be solitary hunters which use a range of around 100 acres each. A male ferret's territory may overlap that of several females with which he mates. Females raise alone a litter of about three to four kits. Black-footed ferrets live underground as much as possible in order to avoid their natural enemies, which are hawks, bobcats, owls, badgers and coyotes.

**Threats to Survival:** The decline of the black-footed ferret is almost entirely due to government-sponsored poisoning of prairie dog towns and development of farms, roads, towns, etc. over prairie dog colonies. The highly specialized ferret relies on prairie dogs for food and shelter. Prairie dog towns have been reduced by 98% since the turn of the century, though recent studies have proven that the grass-eating prairie dogs are not significant competition with livestock for forage. The final blow to the wild ferrets came in the form of canine distemper, which is always fatal. Any unknown groups of ferrets that may remain in the wild are almost certainly inbreeding.

**Conservation Status:** Recently considered by many to be the most endangered mammal in North America, the black-footed ferret is listed as an endangered species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the IUCN Red Data Book. Sightings of black-footed ferrets are frequently reported, but in most cases these can be traced to escaped domestic ferrets, which are often mistaken for black-footed ferrets.

**Zoo Programs -- SSP:** The captive breeding program began with just 18 animals at the Wyoming Game and Fish Research Facility. Fortunately, the ferret breeds readily in captivity, like its close relative, the mink. This population has increased to about 330 animals, which are split between the Wyoming facility, Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo, Louisville Zoo, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, the National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center, the Phoenix Zoo and the Metropolitan Toronto Zoo. The program has four goals: successful captive breeding, conservation education, habitat preservation and teaching captive ferrets survival skills before they are reintroduced to the wild. One recent development in the program was the successful artificial insemination of three black-footed ferrets, resulting in seven kits.

**Conservation:** Efforts are underway to end government subsidies for prairie dog poisoning, because their towns support not just black-footed ferrets, but an entire ecosystem of prairie life. Other prairie dog town inhabitants such as burrowing owls and mountain plovers are also threatened when prairie dogs are poisoned.

**Education:** The century-old beliefs of ranchers concerning prairie dogs cannot be changed overnight, but hopefully they can be persuaded to allow prairie dogs to coexist with their cattle.

**Reintroduction:** Black-footed ferrets have been released in the Shirley Basin of Wyoming. The reintroduction appears successful, and it is hoped that they can be permanently established there within the next few years. Reintroductions are being planned for other states where black-footed ferrets formerly occurred.

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