

# Black-footed Ferret Recovery Update

## Special Interest Articles:

- Background on Black-footed ferrets and recovery efforts
- 2009 kit production.
- Reintroduction at Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan, Canada!
- 2009 Reintroductions
- Zoo Education and Outreach

Updated list of Ferret Display Facilities

## Background on Black-footed ferrets

Black-footed ferrets are weasel-like animals and one of the most endangered mammals in the world, protected by the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA). They prey almost exclusively on prairie dogs, a burrowing rodent, and rely on these burrows for shelter. Historically, ferrets occurred in the prairie habitats of 12 western states, northern Mexico, and southern Canada, but declined precipitously when prairie dog habitat was lost to several threats including plowing, poisoning and plague (a disease inadvertently introduced into North America around 1900). Numbers of ferrets declined right along with prairie dogs from the late 1800s until 1980 when they were thought to be extinct. Fortunately, one last wild population was discovered in Wyoming, in 1981, and has given rise to a captive breeding program that both ensures the survival of the species and provides animals for reintroduction in to the wild.

## Recovery Strategy

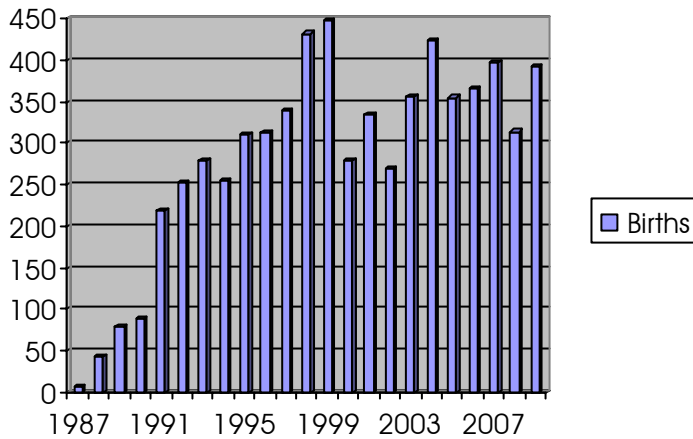
Many partners contribute to black-footed ferret recovery including five participating zoos of the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums (with a focus on captive breeding) and numerous State, Tribal, Federal, and wildlife conservation entities (with a focus on reintroduction). Recovery goals are guided by a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) Recovery Plan. The Service manages the National Black-footed Ferret

Conservation Center where most captive ferrets are managed and from where reintroduction efforts are guided. Each year the carefully managed and conserved captive population of approximately 280 animals is reevaluated and several healthy ferrets are selected for reintroduction. They are released on several sites in the species' historical range where sufficient numbers of prairie dogs to support them exist. Additionally, threats at these sites are

managed to protect ferrets by limiting plague and other factors. Although some ferrets may always be protected in captivity as a safeguard against the unexpected, the recovery strategy aims to establish sufficient numbers of ferrets, and ferret populations, in the wild so that the species will no longer require ESA listing.

# Kit Tally for 2009

*Ferret captive production this year versus previous years*



Captive breeding of ferrets began in 1987 and has produced 6,555 young to date. Whelping began this year on March 24, with 7 kits being born to female Harp. This year was the 5<sup>th</sup> best year in ferret production with 392 kits born this year. From 1987-2009, 6555 kits have been born in the SSP.

*Additional support from zoos*

Genetic, nutritional and reproductive physiology advisors from several partner zoos contribute to ferret recovery by assisting with breeding selection, animal care and mating husbandry efforts respectively. Through Artificial Insemination, males who are not able to reproduce can still be represented within a generation. Also, frozen sperm from deceased males can increase the population's genetic diversity.

## Reintroduction in to the Wild, 2009... and existing Wild Populations

*Many ferrets at many sites over many years*



More than 2,500 ferrets have been reintroduced into the wild at 19 sites from 1991-2009. Currently, several populations appear to be stable and only receive a few or no ferrets annually:

- Shirley Basin, WY
- Badlands National Park SD
- Conata Basin SD
- Aubrey Valley AZ
- Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation SD
- Rosebud Sioux Reservation SD
- Lower Brule Sioux Reservation SD
- Wind Cave National Park SD
- Logan County KS.

A few other sites are not faring as well

and currently support only a few or no ferrets:

- UL Bend National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), MT
- Ft. Belknap Indian Reservation MT
- Coyote Basin CO
- Wolf Creek CO
- BLM 40 Complex MT

A disproportionate number of current sites are located in the Northern Great Plains. The risk management strategy for ferret recovery could be improved by the development of additional sites in other portions of the ferret's historical range, especially in the more southerly and easterly portions.

*Reintroduction 2009 continued...*

In 2009 additional ferrets were released at Vermejo Ranch, NM; Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, MT; UL Bend NWR MT, Coyote Basin UT; Espee Ranch AZ; Janos MX; and for the first time at Grasslands National Park CN. Sometimes it takes several years for a ferret population to become established in the wild.

## First Canada Reintroduction



Black-footed ferrets were last seen on the Canadian prairies in the early 1900s. Historical data suggest the ferret's range once included the southern grasslands of Saskatchewan and Alberta. Today, prairie dog towns are restricted

to a very small area of Canada in Grasslands National Park, Saskatchewan. In 2004, the Canadian Black-footed Ferret and Black-tailed Prairie Dog Recovery Team was developed with the goal of reintroducing the black-footed ferret to Canada. The Calgary Zoo joined the effort in 2004 and is conducting valuable prairie dog research. After the ferrets get to their new prairie home, researchers from the

Calgary Zoo, Toronto Zoo, Parks Canada, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other partners and volunteers will conduct a monitoring program to see how the ferrets are adjusting to their new Canadian home. A homecoming on the prairies is a celebration of heritage. On October 2, 2009, Grasslands National Park will release black-footed ferrets back to the Canadian Wilds along with neighboring

stakeholders and partners. These prairie ambassadors will contribute to a healthy and diverse native prairie home. - *Parks Canada*

## Education and Outreach Update

### *Zoo Initiatives*

As a part of the regular ferret updates, we will highlight what's going on with Ferret Education at various AZA institutions. If you would like for us to highlight your institution's efforts in an upcoming letter, please contact Nicole Mantz, AZA BFF Education Liaison at [nmantz@cmzoo.org](mailto:nmantz@cmzoo.org).

To start us off, Jeremy Barlow from the Phoenix Zoo an update about their efforts at their Earth Day event this year.

For Earth Day 2009 the Phoenix Zoo focused on our institution's conservation efforts and things people can do to make a difference. One of the biggest highlights was a special presentation at our Conservation Center by Conservation Manager, Tara Sprankle. Tara talked about black-footed ferrets, the role they play in the prairie ecosystem and the role the Phoenix Zoo has played in raising and releasing kits back

into the wild. She discussed the relationship with Arizona Game and Fish and USFWS and the number of zoo employees who have helped in habitat surveys and spotlighting projects. Although the zoo has been involved since 1992, this was news to many of our zoo guests as black-footed ferrets aren't on exhibit and many guests were unaware of the behind-the-scenes project. At the end of the presentation, Tara was able to bring a retired ferret out in



what we call the mobile ferret display. This brief look at an endangered species for zoo guests was an opportunity that many guests were thrilled to experience.

## List of Display Ferret Facilities (As of November, 2009)

1. Bramble Park Zoo- Watertown, SD
2. \*Cheyenne Mountain Zoo- Colo. Springs, CO
3. Dakota Zoo- Bismarck, ND
4. Elmwood Park Zoo- Norristown, PA
5. Fort Worth Zoological Park- Ft. Worth, TX
6. Henry Doorly Zoo- Omaha, NE
7. Hutchinson Zoo- Hutchinson, KS
8. Lee Richardson Zoo- Garden City, KS
9. Louisville Zoological Garden- Louisville, KY
10. National Zoological Park- Washington, DC
11. \*\*National Zoo's Conservation & Research Center- Front Royal, VA
12. North Eastern Wisconsin Zoo- Green Bay, WI
13. Phoenix Zoo- Phoenix, AZ
14. San Diego Wild Animal Park- Escondido, CA
15. Saskatoon Forestry Farm Park & Zoo- Saskatoon, Saskatchewan Canada
16. Toronto Zoo- Scarborough, Ontario Canada
17. \*\*USFWS National Black-footed Ferret Conservation Center- Wellington, CO
18. Zoomerica, Hershey, PA

\* = mobile display in addition to standard display

\*\* = mobile display only



## Teen Shows Passion for Saving Black-footed Ferrets



Hannah Harm, a Colorado teen and Girl Scout, has recently made great strides in her passion for ferret conservation.

A love for domestic ferrets drove her interest towards black-footed ferrets. Hannah has done school projects about black-footed ferrets and also created a Junior Wildlife Badge called "Saving

Endangered Wildlife" through her local Girl Scout Council.

The process of developing the badge led her to the opportunity to spotlight black-footed ferrets in South Dakota. Learn more about Hannah's adventure on the black-footed ferret website:

<http://www.blackfootedferret.org/kits-and-kids.htm>

## Black-footed ferret Contact Information:

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