

All nighter leads to ferret sighting

Saving endangered wildlife a passion for Girl Scout

By Hannah Harm

Anyone, even youth, can help with a cause they care about. As a Girl Scout, I care about endangered species, and, especially, black-footed ferrets. It all began when I went to a camp at the Denver Dumb Friends League and fell in love with domestic ferrets, which led to my obsession with black-footed ferrets. A few months later for a math project, I researched the Maka Foundation, a fund-raising organization of the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe in South Dakota. The Maka Foundation supports the tribe's efforts to reintroduce native plant and animal species on their reservation by the Missouri River. They inspired me to create a Junior Girl Scout badge called "Saving Endangered Wildlife." (The badge was approved by council but is currently on hold until funding is available.) The process of developing the badge led me to getting a real wildlife biologist experience spotlighting black-footed ferrets.

Last August, Shaun Grassel, the wildlife biologist for the Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, invited me to see the ferrets that he had reintroduced to their reservation. Since black-footed ferrets are nocturnal, I would have to stay up into the night to see them.



As my mother drove me to the reservation to learn what spotlighting is all about, I was excited to see ferrets in the wild.

At his office, Shaun gathered up data sheets to record when and where we saw ferrets for his research. Then we gathered the ferret traps and put them in trucks custom-fitted with spotlights to search for the green eye-shine of black-footed ferrets.

We set the traps in fields and traveled all night checking on the traps. On the road, we saw a lot of burrowing owls, deer, cows, cottontails, jack rabbits, one coyote (but we heard a bunch) and two badgers.

At 4:02 a.m., we were starting to give up hope of finding any ferrets. We looked across a field and saw two sets of green eyes in the spotlight. The four eyes were blinking and staring at us. They were two curious black-footed ferret kits.

We saw the kits scamper into their abandoned prairie dog burrow, and we set a trap over the entrance and put wooden plugs into surrounding holes so they couldn't escape. Shaun went to investigate and see if there were any other ferrets around. He called us over, and there, in a hole with her little head sticking out, was a mother ferret! As we got a little bit closer, she ducked in. Shaun told us to approach the hole and we would probably see her waiting there. Sure enough, there she was!

At first, I mistook her little head for a burrowing owl, because I could no longer see the green eye-shine, but only her tan fur in the dark. Then I noticed her little black mask. She went farther down the hole, so we couldn't see her anymore. We set a trap at her hole and put more wooden plugs so she couldn't find an escape route.

During our rounds, we checked the ferret traps twice, but found nobody in them. At sunrise, we removed the traps, because Shaun didn't want the ferrets to be stressed and not reunited as a family. We finally got to the hotel to sleep at 8 a.m.—my first all-nighter! I woke up 6 ½ hours later thrilled about my adventure with endangered wildlife.

Hannah Harm is a Juliette Girl Scout who lives in Highlands Ranch. She attends Euclid Middle School. In addition to saving endangered wildlife, Hannah enjoys playing the flute and oboe and playing volleyball and basketball.