Black-footed Ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) **Status: NSS1; NatureServe G1 S1**

Abundance: Rare

Introduction: The black-footed ferret once occurred throughout the grasslands and basins of interior North America, from southern Canada to Texas. The black-footed ferret was believed to be extinct throughout North America when a small relic population was discovered in a prairie dog colony near Meeteetse, Wyoming, in 1981. Canine distemper and sylvatic plague decimated that population in 1986 and 1987. The 18 surviving ferrets were captured and became the founder population for federal captive breeding efforts initiated by the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD). These efforts were successful and have provided ferrets for reintroduction at nine sites in the western US. Currently only two reintroduced populations have been established and no longer require releases of captive-raised ferrets — one in western South Dakota and the other in southeastern Wyoming. Historical records of black-footed ferrets are known from nearly all sagebrush and grassland habitats in Wyoming; however the only population currently known in the state has been reintroduced into the Shirley Basin area near Medicine Bow. The black-footed ferret has low abundance in Wyoming and is considered rare. In 2004, a minimum of 88 ferrets were observed during a partial survey of Shirley Basin. The WGFD classifies the black-footed ferret as a Species of Special Concern with a Native Species Status of 1 (NSS1) because populations are greatly restricted, making extirpation possible, and there is ongoing significant loss of habitat.

Habitat: The black-footed ferret is found almost exclusively in prairie dog colonies in basin-prairie shrublands, sagebrush-grasslands, and grasslands. It is dependent on prairie dogs for food and all essential aspects of its habitat, especially prairie dog burrows where it spends most of its life underground.

Problems:

- Eradication of prairie dogs by humans directly coincided with the demise of the black-footed ferret;
- Epizootics of sylvatic plague and canine distemper minimize the potential for successful reintroduction under current management paradigms;
- Successful reintroduction efforts are limited by the availability of captive-raised ferrets; inadequate funding; and protocol that is cumbersome, cost-ineffective, and out-of-date;
- Funding has been inadequate to annually monitor the ferret population and habitat in Shirley Basin; and
- Prairie dog eradication efforts and the legitimate needs of many livestock producers limit the number of potential reintroduction sites for black-footed ferrets. Recent petitions to list prairie dogs under the Endangered Species Act have accelerated eradication efforts and disabled cooperative programs with private landowners.

Conservation Actions:

- Develop and maintain at least two wild black-footed ferret populations in Wyoming, including the population in Shirley Basin. Continue to monitor the Shirley Basin ferret population, the status of its habitat, and diseases;
- Evaluate prairie dog habitat annually in order to analyze and predict how many black-footed ferrets Wyoming's prairie dog towns can support;
- Evaluate the potential and need for future translocations into the Shirley Basin/Medicine Bow Management Area to minimize the loss of genetic diversity in the ferret population;
- Develop a cooperative management program for prairie dogs and associated grassland species in Wyoming;
- Continue to coordinate with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to determine the availability of captive-raised ferrets and assist in developing a streamlined, cost-effective reintroduction program in Wyoming;
- Identify additional reintroduction approaches and sites in Wyoming; and
- Evaluate the potential to utilize the captive breeding and conditioning facilities at the Tom Thorne/Beth Williams Research Center after the USFWS moves its operation to another facility.

References and Additional Reading:

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