

10. Black Footed Ferrets: Making a Comeback

One of the most memorable moments of our lives took place in the middle of the night on a prairie in central South Dakota, near the Brule Indian Reservation. That cold, dark fall night in that prairie, we got our first glimpse of what might be the rarest mammal in North America, the Black Footed Ferret.

Black Footed Ferrets are nocturnal, meaning they are most active at night, as well as Fossorial, meaning they live mostly underground, spending the majority of their time in vacant prairie dog burrows. They emerge at night look for prey. We knew that finding a Black Footed Ferret was not going to be an easy task. Female ferrets are called “jills”, males are called “hobs” and young are called “kits”. The average life span of a ferret in the wild is only 1-3 years.

Black-footed ferrets are native to the North American prairies. They were once found in 12 states in the U.S. as well as parts of Canada and Mexico. Originally, the prairie dog ecosystem occupied 20 percent of the entire western rangeland, allowing ferrets to cover a large geographic area. Today, less than two percent of their original geographic distribution remains.

European settlement across the North American prairie altered the landscape through plowing and prairie dog eradication efforts. As their habitat and food source diminished, so did the black-footed ferret. By the late 1950's, black-footed ferrets were thought to be extinct.

In 1964, a small population of black-footed ferrets was found in Mellette County, South Dakota. They captured nine ferrets and brought them into captivity in the hopes of starting a captive breeding program in an effort to bring them back. Unfortunately, those efforts were unsuccessful and the last ferret died in captivity in 1979. The black-footed ferret was considered extinct.

In an amazing turn of events, black-footed ferrets were rediscovered in 1981 by a Wyoming rancher, giving hope to the species yet again, and the Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Program was born.

Since 1991 federal and state agencies, with the help of others, have been reintroducing ferrets back into the wild. Beginning in Wyoming, reintroduction efforts have since expanded to Montana, South Dakota, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Kansas, Canada and Mexico.

Recovery of the black-footed ferret is attainable. However, there are still obstacles to overcome including disease and habitat loss. Thankfully to reintroduction programs, these cute creatures were saved from extinction, and this time we hope they are back to stay.