

Black-footed ferrets: An Endangered Species Act success story (so far)

In 1994, parts of Badlands National Park and Buffalo Gap National Grassland (South Dakota) were designated as the Conata Basin/Badlands Recovery Area for the federally endangered black-footed ferret. A major, four-year reintroduction program began, which was described in detail in 1995 in *Park Science* 15(2):1,16–18. Designation as a “nonessential experimental population” allowed biologists flexibility and use of adaptive management techniques critical to bringing back from the edge of extinction this secretive, little-known species.

So where does the program stand nearly eight years down the road? Badlands Chief of Resource Management Brian Kenner and Black-footed Ferret Program Manager Doug Albertson report that the population has reached approximately 250 animals. Most of the ferrets reside on the national grassland because of the extensive black-tailed prairie dog complexes found in the vast prairie there. (Prairie dogs are the sole food source of the ferret.) As many as 55 wild-born litters (averaging approximately 3 kits/litter) have been born there in a single year. Perhaps most significant is that wild-born kits from this recovery area are now being captured and translocated to the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation, to the east of the park, to help reestablish ferrets in a new area. These wild-born animals have a

better survival rate than captive-born individuals, thus jump-starting a population that, because of the reservation’s vast prairie dog towns, has the potential to number several hundred.

Disease, particularly sylvatic plague, canine distemper, and tularemia remain serious concerns to ferrets and prairie dogs. However, nonlethal blood sampling of predators in the area does not indicate an immediate threat. Plague, an introduced disease that has decimated prairie dog populations in recovery areas west of South Dakota, presently shows no indication of reaching the Conata Basin/Badlands. Establishment of a large, thriving ferret population farther east on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation will afford greater security from any future outbreaks and is therefore a high priority for the interagency ferret recovery team.

While Badlands National Park cannot by itself support a sustainable ferret population, it is a valuable part of the Conata Basin/Badlands population area, and now has a base-funded ferret management program for long-term monitoring of ferrets, prairie dogs, and related habitat parameters. In the future, should a disease outbreak or other factors decimate this ferret population, the park’s experienced, professional staff will be able to translocate excess animals from other wild populations (that may themselves originate from the Conata Basin/Badlands population) to again restore the population. Only by having several large populations like the Conata Basin/Badlands will the species be secure for the long term.



Black-footed ferret as it was about to be released in 1994 in Badlands National Park.

