

GREAT PLAINS

Ferret future looks bright

Multiple agency biologists working in Badlands National Park, South Dakota, ended 1995 with several encouraging findings regarding the ongoing black-footed ferret restoration. Between November 19 and December 15, they detected 16 live ferrets during spotlight surveys in and adjacent to the wilderness areas of the park. These animals included: 6 female and 3 male juveniles released last fall that have survived in the wild for more than 50 days; 1 male and 1 female (each 2 years old) released as juveniles in the fall of 1994 that have survived over 440 days in the wild, of which the female raised a wildborn litter last summer; and 3 1995-

wildborn kits (gender undetermined). The ratio of 7 females to 4 males is expected to be adequate for reproduction. Additionally, the ferrets have become very effective predators with those surviving from the fall 1994 release having killed an estimated 125-150 prairie dogs each.

These findings support continued releases and follow-up research. An estimated 60% of 1995 kits born in the park have survived at least 3 months following dispersal from their mother's burrow. This is contrasted with a 30% survival rate of preconditioned juveniles released during 1995. Still, the 30% survival figure is among the highest monitored from the 8 fall reintroductions conducted to date in Wyoming, Montana, and South Dakota from 1991 through 1995.

The park anticipates a February 1996 release of 9 preconditioned juveniles. These 7 male and 2 female ferrets will have spent 2 ½ months in preconditioning pens. They will also be the first released in winter, just before breeding season.