



Common Name Black-footed ferret

Scientific Name *Mustela nigripes*

Status Endangered

Species Description A large weasel with a striking black mask across the face. The feet, legs to the shoulder, and terminal fourth of the tail are also black. The upper parts are buffy yellow with some dark brown hairs on the back and top of the head. The underparts are a lighter cream or buff color. The total length of the male is 21 to 23 inches. The female is slightly smaller.

Distribution

Historic The species ranged from Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas north through the western Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states into southern Canada.

Existing Recent investigations have failed to confirm the existence of the species in New Mexico. Ferret numbers have declined so significantly that South Dakota and Wyoming are the only states with confirmed ferret sightings in the recent past.

Reasons for Decline Grassland conversion and the widespread and intensive control of prairie dogs are the primary reason for the species' decline. The species is considered to be almost totally dependent upon prairie dogs.

Habitat There is a definite and primary association of ferrets with prairie dogs and prairie dog towns. Prairie dog burrows provide protection from inclement weather conditions, and at least some degree of protection from predators. The burrows also provide an environment in which the ferrets may rear their young.

Food Prairie dogs are by far the preferred food source. Ferrets are also known to eat ground squirrels, jackrabbits, pocket gophers, mice, meadowlarks, horned larks, burrowing owls, snakes and insects.

Species Sign In digging out a prairie dog burrow, or in excavating one of its own, the ferret backs out with dirt held against its chest, dragging dirt farther from the entrance of the burrow each trip. This results in a typical trench, 3 to 5 inches wide, and at times up to 11 feet long. These trenches are one of the best indicators of the presence of ferrets in a dog town, since no other species in the community leaves this type of structure.

Did You Know? Ferrets are extremely unsociable, with adults typically coming together only for the breeding season.

