

Back from the Brink: Black-Footed Ferrets Give Birth in the Wild & Second Release Bolsters Population

2010 Field Season Bulletin

Finding Ferret Families, Celebrating with a Community of Volunteers & Students and Dealing with Dusting!

Monitoring Update – April, August & September 2010 Results

In March 2010, over a two week monitoring period, ferret trackers positively identified a minimum of 12 individuals ferrets, corresponding to a 35% survival rate from ferrets originally released in the previous October 2009. This overwinter survival rate is similar to other reintroduction sites in the United States.



Bringing the Experience to Canadians – CBC film crew

In the early morning hours of July 25, 2010, a playful litter of kits was observed on a black-tailed prairie dog colony. For the first time in more than 70 years, black-footed ferrets had been born in the wild in Canada!

The black-footed ferret mother and her 3 kits appeared healthy and engaged in honing their survival instincts. This exciting discovery was captured by a documentary film crew for *Nature of Things* with David Suzuki. The inspiring footage will be shared with Canadians early in 2011.

“It is a privilege and profound experience to be able to be part of this story,”

shares documentary director, Kenton Vaughan. *“This species was on the brink of extinction and now we have caught the first glimpse of a new generation of wild born animals.”*



4th Year Vet Students Come to Grasslands

Monitoring and trapping of ferrets was conducted over a 2 week period in August 2010 to assess animal health, population reproduction, and to tag wildborn kits. This effort was supported by 38 individuals from across the country, including 22 volunteers (3 returning), and 16 individuals providing inkind support from Parks Canada Agency (GNP, Saskatoon, Calgary WNSC), Saskatchewan Government Agency partners and from Non-Government Organizations (Calgary Zoo, Toronto Zoo).

In August, over a 9 night period, approximately 816 hours were dedicated to nighttime ferret monitoring. Approximately 618 hours spent searching for and trapping ferrets, while veterinarians and trained Parks Canada biologists spent about 198 hours in 2 remote field labs. Then, mid-September, 4th year veterinary students and instructors from five Canadian veterinary colleges came to support the monitoring program as part of their Ecosystem Health Rotation. Dr. Todd Shury, Parks Canada wildlife health specialist, hosted the students at Grasslands during this time. Over 3 nights, Parks Canada Agency (PCA) staff spent approximately 30 hours in field labs while volunteers dedicated approximately 210 hours toward re-trapping kits and searching for any other ferrets to assess reproduction.

From the 2009 release sites, the 2010 monitoring results indicate the Snakepit dog town has 4 adults (1 male and 3 females) with 2 of the females showing evidence of birthing. One litter of three kits was trapped (2 females and one male – all in very healthy condition) and another lactating female was discovered. The kits were anesthetized using portable gas anesthetic units and implanted with microchips and vaccinated against sylvatic plague and canine distemper; two diseases which were identified as major threats in the recovery strategy. These kits are important to the recovery program as it indicates that the population is successfully reproducing in Canadian conditions and bodes very well for future population growth of this fragile population of prairie carnivores.



2010 PIT tag monitoring of 2009 Ferret

What is ferret monitoring?

Volunteer spot-lighters or ‘ferret trackers’ use powerful spot lights while traversing potentially occupied ferret habitat on foot during night-time hours. The trackers look for the characteristic reflection of the green eyeshine from the ferrets. Once located, ferrets are identified using a microchip reader which reads a passive integrated transponder (PIT) tag implanted under the skin in the neck area.

At the Larson, Monument, and Dixon prairie dog colonies, adult females were identified however no signs of litters were apparent.

Of significance, is that the low male survival from the 2009 release and their limited distribution was such that 4 ferret

females were not bred during 2009.



And WE couldn't do it without YOU....!

Since their reintroduction, this once extirpated native species has been closely monitored by biologists from Parks Canada and supporting governmental agencies or organizations and dedicated volunteers. The early success of the black-footed ferret reintroduction program has attracted widespread interest, strengthening the connection between Canadians and conservation efforts in Canada. The recovery strategy for this species depends on the dedication of many to make it possible. **Thank you to Recovery Team partners and volunteers for your ongoing support!!**

Over 1500 hours were dedicated towards the conservation studies and monitoring of the black-footed ferrets over 17 nights of monitoring among August, September and October, 2010. Volunteers dedicated approximately 893 hours, partnering NGOs contributed about 200 hrs, Saskatchewan government agencies contributed about 52 hours, and PCA staff contributed



2010 October Monitoring Crew

approximately 374 hours at night, with additional time spent coordinating the monitoring program during the day-



Paul Knaga - out in the field!

In praise of people making this possible:

the team from the Parks Canada Western & Northern Service Centre has provided Grasslands National Park with technical expertise, fantastic field

support, superior good humor since the ferrets arrived in 2009. A special 'shout-out' goes to Paul Knaga, PCA Geomatics Specialist, as he goes on to pursue other adventures in his career.

Second Ferret Release 2010 and Fall Activities



Matt Weiss, SK-MOE with Ashley Wruth, GNPC releasing 2010 ferrets from Toronto Zoo. Sept 2010
Photo: Johane Janelle

In the twilight hours of September 23rd, 15 ferrets were welcomed into their new home on the Canadian prairie dog towns in Saskatchewan. Once again, the ferrets were transported under the careful eye of Scott Larson, USFWS. This year, very special guest Valerie Naylor, Superintendent from Theodore Roosevelt National Park, North Dakota attended the release. Ms. Naylor stated, "I will never forget the 'ferret night'. I was very moved... I learned a lot from the way you involved the community and volunteers in the ferret program. It is exceptional!"

*Ferret trackers spend many hours in the wild prairie nights. Brilliant stars, occasional fog, full moons or black nights...we have a range of experiences. There are nights of few ferrets but new discoveries, nights where only deer, rabbits and coyotes are seen, and then there are those nights where magic happens, and ferrets are a poppin' up on many dogtowns all through the night!!
~A. Wruth, GNPC*

October 2010 Ferret Monitoring

Thirty days after the 2nd release, ferret trackers

headed into the prairie night to search for the captive-born kits. Longer nights required longer hours in the field to survey the dusk to dawn period for ferrets. PCA staff, Recovery team partners and volunteers, including 11 Lakeland College students, spent approximately 463 hours over 5 nights surveying prairie dog colonies for signs of the newly re-introduced ferrets. There were multiple sightings of ferrets. In total, 13 individuals were identified: 7 adult ferrets released in 2009 (5 females : 2 males) and 1 was a 2010 wildborn male. Five newly released 2010 ferrets were identified, 1 of which could not be PIT tag confirmed (1 Female : 3 Males : 1 unknown sex).

Sylvatic Plague and Dealing with Dusting the Dog Towns:

In mid August 2010, a prairie dog in Grasslands National Park was diagnosed with sylvatic plague. Parks Canada in consultation with its ferret recovery partners and other affected agencies, have been working together to ensure that visitors to Grasslands National Park continue to have a safe and enjoyable visit.

Conservation actions are taking place to protect the only wild Canadian black-tailed prairie dog and black-footed ferret populations. Parks Canada dusted 32,502 burrows with insecticide to control fleas, the plague vector, in October/November over approximately 1000 acres or 1/3 of the prairie dog colony area.



Krista Bekker, GNPC & her duster crew helping to ensure prairie dog health. Oct 2010

