

Ferret Restoration on Fort Belknap Reservation

by Tim Vosburgh

The Fort Belknap Indian Community has been an active participant in black-footed ferret recovery efforts since 1997, when 23 ferrets were first reintroduced on the Fort Belknap Reservation. With more than 13,000 acres (5,260 hectares) of active black-tailed prairie dog colonies, the 650,000-acre (260,000-ha) Reservation, located in north-central Montana, has some of the most suitable black-footed ferret habitat in Montana. "When you look across the West, some of the very best of the remaining black-footed ferret habitat is in Indian country," said Poncho Bigby, Director of Natural Resource Planning at Fort Belknap. The large prairie dog com-

plexes on the reservation could provide habitat for a viable population of endangered black-footed ferrets. Indeed, ferrets have already found a home near Snake Butte, in the northwest corner of the reservation.

In 1996, the Fort Belknap Indian Community and the state of Montana signed an agreement to give the Gros Ventre and Assiniboine Tribes at the Reservation control over its black-footed reintroduction program. The Tribes, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), and Montana traveled a 10-year odyssey to arrive at a request for black-footed ferrets. Since 1997, 110 black-footed ferret kits have been released on the

Snake Butte reintroduction site. With support from the Tribal Council, biologists plan to expand ferret reintroduction efforts to other prairie dog complexes on the Reservation this year.

One obstacle now stands in the way of ferret reintroductions on Fort Belknap. That obstacle is sylvatic plague, an exotic disease fatal to black-tailed prairie dogs. A plague outbreak was detected about 15 miles (24 kilometers) east of Snake Butte on the Peoples Creek prairie dog complex in September 1999. Visual surveys indicated that approximately 1,800 acres (730 ha) of prairie dogs have been wiped out. Apparently, no black-tailed prairie dog complex in the country is immune to the impacts of plague.

Cultural and Spiritual Aspects

Ferret reintroductions at Fort Belknap have returned an animal that has cultural and religious significance to area tribes. Tribal dancers have long adorned their costumes with ferret skins and tied them into their braids. Lyman Young, a member of the Assiniboine Tribe born and raised on Fort Belknap Reservation, remembers that his grandfather wore black-footed ferret pelts on his dance costume. The ferret skins were considered sacred possessions that were buried with his grandfather following his death.

The social aspects of the recovery process were evident during the afternoon of September 9, 1997, when, a ceremony was held in honor of the first ferret kits to be reintroduced on the Reservation. With the invocation of prayers and pipe smoke atop Snake Butte, the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Indians welcomed back a missing link





to the prairie ecology. During the ceremony, Tribal members talked about how rich they are as a people because of the magnificent surroundings they are fortunate to live in and because they are part of a culture rich in traditions. They accepted the ferrets not with reluctance but with enthusiasm.

The return of the black-footed ferret raises hopes for preserving old ways. "Everything is finally coming back.... a lot of young people are finding out about themselves from the animals. In our prayers, we asked the Creator to let the ferrets multiply and help mend the circle of life," said George Shield, an Assiniboine elder, before he passed away recently. "All these things belong here. We humans can't live without animals, because we are part of the same circle." Gros Ventre spiritual leader Joe Iron Man, Sr., described the little ferret as big medicine for his people. "It is one of the animals we used in our doctoring," he said. "Bringing back the

buffalo to the reservation was the first step in restoring our old ways. The return of the ferret is the final step."

More than 100 ferrets have been released near Snake Butte, where over 400 bison roam freely on 12,000 acres (4,850 ha) of native short grass prairie. Another 20 kits are being proposed for release on the bison pasture in 2000. The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service characterizes the reintroduction area as among the best remaining short grass prairie habitat in North America.

Reintroduction Update

Despite strong community support, the efforts to establish a viable population of black-footed ferrets have met with only moderate success. Ferret kits have been released on Fort Belknap during each of the past 3 years, but so far only one litter of kits has been produced in the wild. The first wild-born kits were found on the Snake Butte bison pasture in September 1999.

Mike Fox, Director of the Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Department: "The black-footed ferret belongs in this environment. The ferret is part of the buffalo culture. It brings back another part of the system, completing the circle between prairie dogs and bison and reestablishes a relationship with the land."

Fort Belknap Fish and Wildlife Dept. photos

During March 2000, biologists conducting routine spotlight surveys also identified a minimum of five black-footed ferret kits that were released in 1998 and 1999. More intensive surveys will be conducted this year. The entire Fort Belknap Indian Community is hopeful that a self-sustaining population will soon become established on the bison pasture.

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