

The Black-footed Ferret

By Charles L. Homolka

ANOTHER species of wildlife may soon vanish from the American scene. This is the black-footed ferret *Mustela nigripes*, a mysterious, seldom seen and little known animal. Its life history is not thoroughly understood, its range is not certain, and the number of individuals which survive is still less certain. Even the National Park Service has little information about it, but wildlife conservationists agree that it is near extinction. It may be the rarest mammal in the United States today.

A member of the weasel family, the black-footed ferret looks like a yellow-tinted mink. It is buffy-yellow with lighter underparts but is easily distinguishable by the black tip of its tail, its black feet, and the black mask across the face. Its range coincided with that of the prairie dog on which it preys. John J. Audubon and John Bachman were the first naturalists to describe it. Their description was based on an imperfect skin sent to them from the lower waters of the Platte River of Nebraska by naturalist Alexander Culbertson in 1851. Nearly 25 years passed before the animal was reported again, and other naturalists began to doubt whether it even existed. In 1877 Elliott Coues wrote that he could obtain only five or six fragmentary skins, and when Clinton Hart Merriam wrote his synopsis of the weasels of North America in 1896, he reported having fewer than half a dozen specimens with which to work. This shows that the black-footed ferret has always been quite rare, even when the West was first being explored and settled. The Wildlife Management Institute calls it "one of the very rare species . . . on the danger list for many years." Several years ago Walt Disney and his staff were able to trap three black-footed ferrets in the central part of South Dakota for the motion picture, *Vanishing Prairie*. These were later released in Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota, and Jess H. Lombard, park superintendent, reports: "Insofar as we know, they are still here, although they are rarely observed and their sex not known", but in 1961 scientists from the American Museum of Natural History could find no specimens for study.

Little is known about the habits of this ferret. It is believed to be almost entirely dependent upon the prairie dog for its existence, and is seldom found in an environment other than that of a prairie dog town. That it breeds in prairie dog burrows is largely conjecture based on the fact that its prey is principally the prairie dog. Other victims may include rodents, birds and reptiles but there are few reports to substantiate these. In Custer County, Nebraska, a ferret was seen carrying a thirteen-lined ground squirrel, and years ago a ferret reportedly lived under a wooden sidewalk in Hays, Kansas, where it killed rats.

Since the prairie dog is still being wiped out in many areas, the

black-footed ferret is also vanishing. At first, the prairie dog population increased with the advance of civilisation, for many of its predators such as wolves, coyotes, hawks and eagles were killed or driven from the prairie. The removal of the buffalo and other large game eliminated an important competitor for forage, and the introduction of crops increased its food supply. But about the turn of the century full scale war was declared on prairie dogs, which competed with domestic livestock for grass, and there was large scale destruction by poisoning and fumigation. The prairie dog's original range extended from the Missouri River in Montana and the Dakotas southward through Texas; its western limit was the Rocky Mountains, except in the south where it extended into Arizona, and the eastern limit was roughly the 97th meridian. The ferret was found in the same area.

In 1952 the plight of the ferret was discussed by the executive committee of the American Committee for International Wildlife Protection, who asked Victor H. Calahane to make a survey to determine its numbers and distribution. This produced 42 acceptable reports involving 90 ferrets, most of them sighted between 1948 and 1952. In some cases duplication of reports was suspected and the actual number of animals seen may have ranged as low as 50 or as high as 60 or 70. Nearly one third of the reports involved dead animals, most of which had been shot, trapped, run over on roads, or had died in captivity. Most of those observed alive were reported in prairie dog towns then being eradicated. Although it is not known if they eat poisoned prairie dogs, the ferrets may be killed by fumigation. Also, whenever a town is eliminated, the ferrets, if they have been lucky enough to survive, must move to more favourable habitat—if they can find it. South Dakota reported the most ferrets—followed by Montana, Nebraska, Colorado, North Dakota, Wyoming, Texas, New Mexico and Utah. They appear to be most numerous from Central and Western Nebraska to the south-west of North Dakota.

One recommendation is to establish populations of black-footed ferrets in sanctuaries where prairie dog colonies can survive. This was attempted in Wind Cave National Park with the three ferrets used in the Walt Disney picture. Live-trapping and relocation in suitable habitat was favoured as the best approach. However, the ferrets are so rare and little understood that other biologists recommend a life history study in order to determine their basic needs for survival.

In a recent prairie dog report of the Conservation Foundation and the New York Zoological Society, biologist Carl B. Koford observed that a study of the life history of the black-footed ferret "is a project that will require patience, skill, resourcefulness, and luck". There may not be much time for such a project. The Colorado Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, combining efforts of Colorado State University, the State of Colorado, the Wildlife Management Institute, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service, says it has "no information on the black-footed ferret other than that it is nearly extinct".

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