

Badlands

National Park
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The Ferret and the Prairie Dog: Lives Entwined



As the sun sets, the prairie dogs settle into their burrows. The town grows quiet. A black-footed ferret emerges from an abandoned prairie dog hole. It slinks across the town, searching for an evening meal. Silently, it slips into a burrow and quickly reappears with a young prairie dog in its mouth. The year is 1961. The place is the Badlands...

THE PRAIRIE DOG

Black-tailed prairie dogs live in family groups within colonies, or towns, on the Badlands prairie. These large ground squirrels have lived on the Great Plains for thousands of years and have evolved as an integral part of the grasslands. Their towns nourish and shelter a great variety of plants and animals. Predators such as the golden eagle, coyote, bobcat and badger depend on prairie dogs for food. Burrowing owls nest in abandoned prairie dog holes. On

hot days, snakes, mice and insects take refuge in the cool burrows. Bison often gather in prairie dog towns where they eat the nutritious young grass and take dust baths in the loose dirt of the prairie dog mounds.

Prairie dogs eat grass and other plants. They dig extensive underground burrow systems, and build mounds at their burrow entrances, making viewpoints from which to spot approaching danger.



Ranchers consider prairie dogs pests because they compete with cattle for grass and dig holes that can be dangerous to live-stock. Many landowners try to eradicate prairie dogs on their lands by poisoning.

Nationwide, prairie dog towns have been reduced from an estimated 692 million acres in the 1800s to under five million acres today. It is important that places are preserved where prairie dogs can live undisturbed.

THE FERRET

The black-footed ferret is a member of the weasel family. Active mostly at night, ferrets live in abandoned prairie dog burrows and use prairie dogs for food. Since 90% of their diet consists of prairie dogs, ferrets probably cannot survive in the wild outside of prairie dog towns.

The black-footed ferret formerly ranged throughout the Great Plains. As prairie dogs were exterminated, the ferrets lost much of their food supply, and numbers of ferrets declined sharply.

Today, the black-footed ferret may be extinct in the wild. All known remaining ferrets are now part of a captive breeding program designed to increase their numbers and ultimately restore them to the wild. The first years of the breeding program have been successful, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service hopes to establish an experimental population of black-footed ferrets on a selected prairie dog town in 1991. If the experimental population is a success, other populations will eventually be established in suitable prairie dog towns throughout the Great Plains.

THE ROLE OF BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK

Prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets are both natural parts of the mixed-grass prairie. Badlands National Park strives to preserve and restore the native prairie plants and animals for the enjoyment of visitors and for future generations.

Currently, the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, are working with local ranchers, agricultural organizations, conservation groups and other interested persons to determine the feasibility of introducing ferrets into the Badlands National Park area. The issue is controversial because ranchers are concerned that reintroduction of ferrets will mean more protection for prairie dogs and a reduction of prairie dog control on public and surrounding private land.

Local and public support for the black-footed ferret introduction program is crucial before ferrets can be released.

The challenges are many and the answers are few. But perhaps someday in the future, visitors to Badlands National Park may have the opportunity to catch a glimpse of North America's rarest mammal -- the black-footed ferret.

COMMENTS



If you have comments on the ferret reintroduction effort in South Dakota, or if you would like more information, contact Badlands National Park or:

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