

Kid's KOrner

Wyoming Program Works To Save Last Of Black-Footed Ferrets

WASHINGTON — Before anyone enters the room on the University of Wyoming campus, he must shower and put on a disinfected coat, overshoes, and surgical mask.

The "patients" inside aren't necessarily sick or even feeble. But they are among the last of a species in very critical condition.

They are 11 black-footed ferrets, small members of the weasel family with black paws and face masks, brought in from the wild this summer to go into quarantine in Laramie, Wyo. If they emerge disease-free, the ferrets will join six others at a Wyoming Game and Fish Department breeding facility 45 miles northeast of Laramie.

Edge Of Extinction

The 17 captive ferrets, along with one or two others that were seen in the wild this summer, may be the last black-footed ferrets on earth. Human destruction of their habitat — they live in prairie-dog burrows — and recent waves of fatal disease have left the species hanging on the edge of extinction.

"With this animal, things could go either way," says Dr. Tim W. Clark, a biologist who has pursued and studied the ferrets for 13 years with support from the National Geographic Society. "It's just too soon to tell how it's going to come out."

A long, lithe mammal with eyes that shine emerald in the night, the nocturnal black-footed ferret runs with the grace of a cheetah and plays like a kitten. Spirits rose this summer when some ferrets, most of them young, were sighted near Meeteetse, Wyo., the site of the original discovery of a ferret in 1981.

"We went into last winter with an estimate of two to 10 individuals, and since more than half of a population may die during a

winter, we could have ended up with almost nothing in the spring," Clark says.

But neither the wild population nor the captive group was large enough to ensure the species' survival. "We potentially had a loser on both ends," Clark says. All of the wild ferrets are targeted for the breeding program.

"We really need 20 animals for a sound genetic base," says Dr. Ulysses S. Seal, a specialist in animal population management who is advising the project leaders. "These captive animals will be the founders of new colonies to be started in the wild."

Though reluctant to attempt captive breeding in the past, the officials and scientists now agree that it represents the only hope for the species.

More Danger In Wild

"Those in the wild are at greater risk — from predation, starvation, injury, or disease," says Dr. Tom Thorne, veterinarian for the Wyoming Fish and Game Department, which has primary responsibility for the animals. Two juveniles from one litter were lost in August, despite the monitoring.

The authorities concede that captive breeding should have been started several years ago when the ferret population was relatively large — 129 individuals. That was before sylvatic plague struck the prairie dogs that are the ferrets' prime food source.

And they're determined not to repeat one of the greatest mistakes of the past, when six ferrets were housed together in the initial captive-breeding effort. By the time it was discovered in 1985 that two of the captive ferrets were suffering from canine distemper, they had fatally infected the other four. By then distemper had taken a severe toll in the wild, and only



A female black-footed ferret scans her neighborhood, on the plains near Meeteetse, Wyo. The ferret spends most of the day underground but emerges at night to hunt. A series of setbacks, including a distemper outbreak last year, has decimated the only known population of black-footed ferrets and left the species fighting for survival. Now biologists have captured some of the ferrets in an effort to breed them and save the species.

six more could be found.

Spring came and went this year without successful laboratory breeding, and if no mating occurs next spring, Seal says, artificial insemination will begin.

The biologists, hampered by a lack of basic knowledge about the ferret's reproduction, are studying the domestication history of the animal's cousins — the mink and the European ferret, which is sold as a pet. The black-footed ferret has never been bred successfully

in captivity.

"The animals are accepting captivity quite well, with no evidence of neurotic behavior," Seal says.

Meanwhile, the search for more of them goes on. Each midnight in Wyoming, a patrol sets out with spotlights to search 120 square miles of prairie-dog habitat for signs of ferrets — their characteristic green eyeshine, or perhaps a litter of young scampering above ground before they go into the

burrow for the day.

Reward Offered

A \$5,000 reward has been posted for a black-footed ferret lead in Montana, where the last verified sighting occurred eight years ago. "This is a last-ditch effort to see if somebody knows something we don't," says John Cada, a state biologist. "There's probably less than a 50-50 chance."

Five years ago biologist Clark paid a reward of \$250. He had been

(Turn to Page B12)

COLOR THIS!

- | | |
|-----------|---------------|
| 1. BLACK | 6. PEACH |
| 2. RED | 7. GREEN |
| 3. YELLOW | 8. LT. BROWN |
| 4. BLUE | 9. LT. BLUE |
| 5. BROWN | 10. LT. GREEN |

COPERNICUS: HIS REAL NAME WAS NIKLAS KOPERNIGK. NOT MANY PEOPLE KNEW HIM BY HIS POLISH NAME. HIS NAME IN LATIN WAS COPERNICUS. HE WAS CALLED "THE FATHER OF MODERN ASTRONOMY. HE WOULD SPEND HOURS WATCHING THE STARS KEEPING EXCELLENT RECORDS OF WHAT HE SAW.



COLOR EYES BLUE

KERN

1473 - 1543
9-25-86