

America's  
**ANIMAL  
COMEBACKS**

# Black-footed Ferrets

*Back from the Brink*

by Miriam Aronin

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# Contents

A Thief in the Night .....	4
Long Ago in the West.....	6
New Hope .....	8
Disaster .....	10
Captured!.....	12
The Last Chance .....	14
New Kits .....	16
Many Challenges .....	18
Return to the Wild .....	20
Learning to Survive.....	22
On the Right Track .....	24
The Future .....	26
Black-footed Ferret Facts.....	28
Other Weasel Family Members in Danger.....	29
Glossary.....	30
Bibliography .....	31
Read More .....	31
Learn More Online .....	31
Index.....	32
About the Author .....	32



# *A Thief in the Night*

It was a cool night in Meeteetse (muh-TEET-see), Wyoming, on September 26, 1981. A dog named Shep wandered around the ranch where he lived. Suddenly, he spotted a strange creature stealing food from his bowl. Shep quickly attacked. He killed the animal and dragged it home.





Shep's owners, John and Lucille Hogg, had never seen anything like it. The dead animal had a long, thin body. The fur around its eyes was black and shaped like a mask. The tip of its tail and its legs were black, too.

The Hoggs showed the furry creature to an animal expert. He could hardly believe his eyes. Shep had found a black-footed ferret—an animal most people thought was **extinct**!



Black-footed ferrets are part of the weasel family. Other animals in this group include otters, wolverines, and skunks.

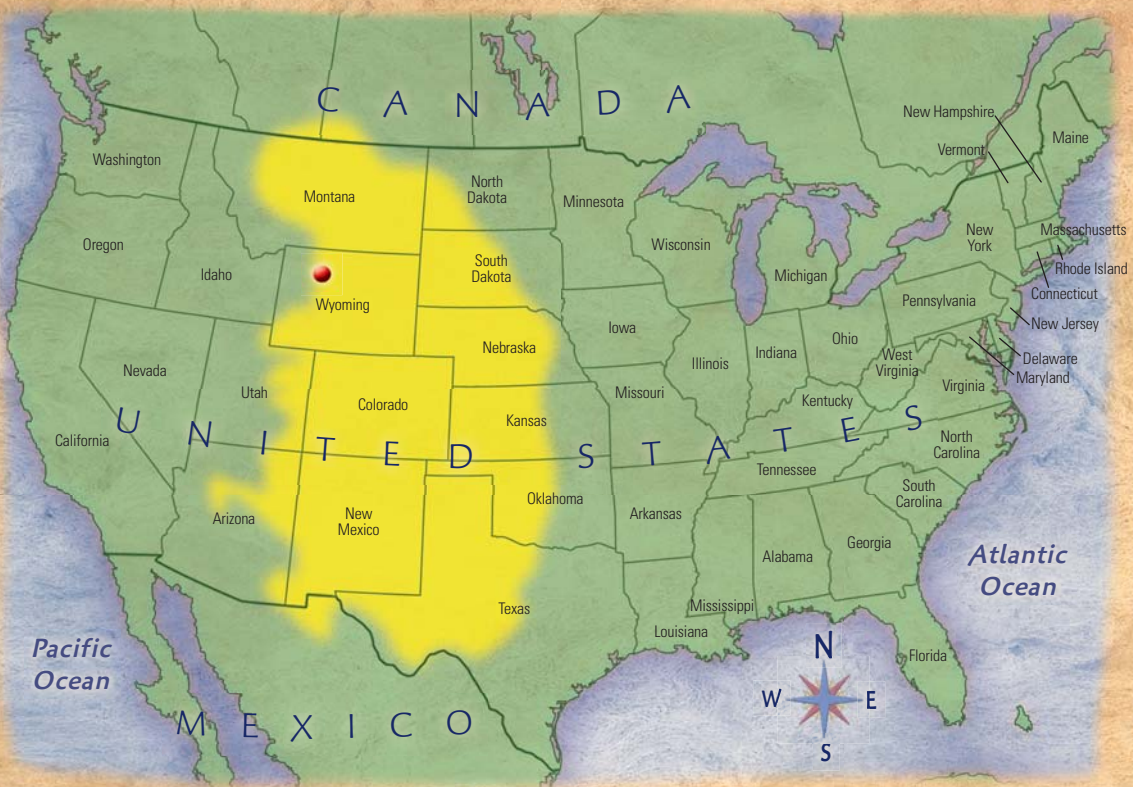
Black-footed ferrets are one of three kinds of ferrets in the world. They are the only kind that live in the wild in North America.



# Long Ago in the West

Black-footed ferrets weren't always so **rare**. Until the 1800s, more than half a million of them lived on the American **prairies**. They ate, slept, and raised their young underground in **burrows** and tunnels. These burrows were dug by the ferrets' main **prey**—prairie dogs.

## Black-footed Ferrets in the Wild



- Where ferrets lived before the 1800s
- Meeteetse, Wyoming

Prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets once lived throughout the American prairies. This map shows where ferrets lived before they began dying out.



In the late 1800s, farmers **settled** the American prairies. To them, prairie dogs were pests. These small animals ate the grass that farmers wanted for their cattle. So the farmers poisoned the prairie dogs. Millions were killed. When ferrets ate the poisoned prairie dogs, they also died in huge numbers. By 1967, it was almost impossible to find black-footed ferrets in the wild. The U.S. government listed the animal as **endangered**.



Before the 1800s, as many as five billion prairie dogs lived in North America. By the 1970s, people had destroyed more than 95 percent of the prairie dog **population**.

In the wild, prairie dogs make up 90 percent of the black-footed ferret's food.

# *Index*

- Biggins, Dean 14  
breeding ferrets 12, 15, 16–17, 18, 21, 22, 24–25, 26–27  
burrows 6, 16, 19, 22  
canine distemper 11, 13  
capturing ferrets 9, 12–13, 14–15  
Colombian weasel 29  
coyotes 13, 21  
disease 11, 13, 25  
Endangered Species Act 28  
European mink 29  
Hammer, Dennie 9  
Hogg, John 5  
Hogg, Lucille 5  
killing prairie dogs 7  
kits 16–17, 18, 20–21, 24–25, 26–27  
Lockhart, Mike 27  
Meeteetse, Wyoming 4, 6, 8, 10–11, 12, 14–15, 16–17, 20, 25  
plague 11  
poison 7  
prairie dogs 6–7, 11, 19, 22, 27, 28  
predators 21, 23  
radio transmitters 9, 21  
reintroducing ferrets 19, 20–21, 22–23, 24–25, 26  
Robo-badger 23  
Shep 4–5, 8  
Shirley Basin, Wyoming 20  
spotlights 10  
survival skills 22–23, 24  
Sybille Wildlife Research Center 16  
weasels 5, 29

## *About the Author*

Miriam Aronin is a writer and editor. She also enjoys reading, knitting, and visiting endangered species at the zoo.



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# *Black-footed Ferrets*

## *Back from the Brink*

On September 26, 1981, a dog named Shep dragged home a strange, furry creature. The dog's owners showed it to an animal expert. He could barely believe his eyes. Shep had found a black-footed ferret—an animal most people thought was extinct! Thousands of the furry creatures had once lived on the American prairies. Yet by the 1980s, only about 100 were still alive. Would people find a way to bring this animal back from the brink of extinction?

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**American Bison**  
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**Bald Eagles**  
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