

## Saving the Black-footed Ferret

**Come along on a tour of the black-footed ferret breeding program at the zoo in Louisville.**

*By Marylou Zarbock*

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The Louisville Zoo is only one of six zoos that participate in the Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Program.

In April I flew to Kentucky to see one of the most endangered mammals on the continent — the black-footed ferret. And I wasn't the only one to go. Thirty-nine other ferret fans registered with the International Ferret Congress to participate in the Derby City Forum that took place at the Louisville Zoo. Attendees heard talks from two black-footed ferret experts and saw the ferrets up close inside the breeding building at the zoo. But that wasn't all that was in store for us.

### Success Through Experience

The two-day event officially began on Saturday at a meeting room inside the zoo. Linda Iroff of the IFC introduced Guy Graves, the black-footed ferret keeper, who gave a presentation about breeding efforts at the zoo. Black-footed ferrets are a separate species from domesticated ferrets and the only ferrets native to North America. In the late 1970s, black-footed ferrets were thought to be extinct, but a small population discovered in Wyoming in 1981 was used to found the current breeding program.

Graves has been involved with the program in Louisville since its inception in 1991 — and Louisville is one of only six zoos that participate in the Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Program.

Graves explained that caring for the ferrets was a learning process. Some of what they learned includes:

- 1) Although the basic diet fed is a prepared meat diet developed by the Toronto Zoo, they occasionally offer pre-killed rats to keep the ferrets' teeth clean.
- 2) The ferrets are kept indoors and the lighting is set to mimic the length of daylight outside. Full-spectrum lighting was originally used, but they discovered the intensity of the light was more important than the type of light. They now use fluorescent lights, which are more economical.
- 3) Should a dam die soon after whelping, the zoo relies on cross-fostering (having another dam take over) if the situation allows.
- 4) The team now handles the kits much less, which reduces stress and increases survival. Stress is probably the biggest challenge faced by captive black-footed ferrets, according to Graves.
- 5) Ambient temperature is critical. The team learned that dams made better mothers when the temperature was kept around 65 degrees Fahrenheit. If it got warmer, it increased the chances that the mother would abandon her babies.

The Louisville Zoo currently has 28 black-footed ferrets in its conservation center (15 females and 13 males). Since 1991 when the program began, the center has bred 468 ferrets, 335 of which have been released. Ferrets bred at the zoo are either destined for release in the wild, or help maintain the program by replacing older ferrets that are retired from breeding. These older ferrets then move on to promote education about the species by becoming exhibits at zoos.

### In The Wild

Travis Livieri of Prairie Wildlife Research spoke later in the day. PWR is a nonprofit agency that researches and conserves prairie species and their habitat. Livieri is a biologist and executive director of PWR. He focused on the history of black-footed ferrets and what happens to them once they leave the breeding facilities.

Before being released into the wild, all captive-bred ferrets spend time in pre-conditioning pens. These large, outdoor pens are built near prairie dog towns. Prairie dogs represent virtually the entire diet of wild black-footed ferrets. Without prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets can't exist. In the pens, ferrets safely acclimate to life in the wild.

After pre-conditioning, ferrets are released into the wild at a select few sites across North America that offer the best

chances for survival. These wild populations are then monitored for success. Monitoring wild, nocturnal animals is not an easy task. It involves riding the prairie for endless hours at night with a spotlight, searching out ferrets by their eye shine (the color reflected back from the eyes when light is shined on them), trapping them safely, giving field exams and many other steps. (For more details, see our January/February 2006 issue for the article "Out West With The Black-Footed Ferret.")

Species recovery is slow, but progress is being made. Since 1987, 5,000 kits have been bred in captivity and 2,000 have been introduced across North America. About 500 black-footed ferrets are now in the wild. One of the reintroduction sites has a self-sustaining population and two others are close to being self-sustaining. But with all the progress, threats still exist — from Mother Nature (via sylvatic plague, distemper outbreaks and other hazards) and mankind (via habitat loss). Livieri closed his talk by pondering whether it would be the sunrise or sunset for black-footed ferrets.

#### Talking About Pet Ferrets

After learning about black-footed ferrets at the Louisville Zoo, Alexandra Sargent-Colburn and Rebecca Stout took the floor. You might recognize them as the columnists for "The Secret Lives Of Ferret Owners" and "Ferret Phenoms" respectively. Both told of the heartwarming and heart-wrenching first encounters each had with ferrets. They then fielded questions that the audience earlier submitted on cards. The questions ranged from ordinary to downright odd. (I'm still not sure what answer was expected for the following question: What is the best way for a saucy sprite to snag a hunky gib, and is it acceptable to sniff bums on the first date?) The laughs brought on by some of the more outrageous questions made a great segue into the auction and raffle that ended the day.

Vendor tables were in the room, which allowed everyone to browse and shop for ferret goodies during breaks.

In the midst of all the fun and education, the International Ferret Congress raised \$1,200 for its programs that benefit domesticated ferrets, and more than \$300 for Prairie Wildlife Research and the Louisville Zoo's black-footed ferret program.

#### For More Info

September 26, 2006, marks the 25th anniversary of the rediscovery of black-footed ferrets. Find out more about efforts to save them at:

Louisville Zoo  
[www.louisvillezoo.org](http://www.louisvillezoo.org)

Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Program  
[www.blackfootedferret.org](http://www.blackfootedferret.org)

Prairie Wildlife Research  
[www.prairiewildlife.org](http://www.prairiewildlife.org)

International Ferret Congress  
[www.ferretcongress.org](http://www.ferretcongress.org)

#### Sunday's Tour

Sunday was zoo day. The larger group broke up into two groups that would tour the black-footed ferret facility either in the morning or the afternoon. Guy Graves met each group and escorted them to the black-footed ferret building, outside the public section of the zoo. After either removing or putting protective bags over our shoes, we were ushered into an office with a viewing window into the black-footed ferret room. The ferret room was quite tidy, with rows of wooden cages. And there they were — black-footed ferrets. A few were visible scampering in their individual cage or popping down a tube to travel to the lower-level nest box. Their speed was impressive.

A monitor on the desk gave a continuous view of Indiana, a new mother with her five-day-old kits. Everyone took turns peering through the window. Some people snapped photos or asked questions of Graves or Livieri. It was a unique, one-of-a-kind opportunity to see an endangered species.