

A Chance To Meet Endangered Black-Footed Ferrets

Visitors see black-footed ferrets and other endangered animals at the Smithsonian's National Zoo Autumn Conservation Festival.

By Linda Iroff

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Visitors learned about black-footed ferrets from Dr. JoGayle Howard.

Ryland is 7 years old and loves ferrets. Mouse is a 4-year-old, endangered black-footed ferret. Ryland met his first black-footed ferret and Mouse her first 7-year-old boy at the Smithsonian's National Zoo Autumn Conservation Festival (ACF) held at the Conservation and Research Center (CRC) in Front Royal, Virginia.

On a sunny weekend in early October, about 3,600 visitors attended the annual autumn event at the normally-closed-to-the-public facility. People had the opportunity to talk one-on-one with scientists and other specialists about many of the zoo's conservation efforts. They also got to meet endangered animals and to enjoy family-oriented activities such as scavenger hunts and live music. Some of the popular exhibits included a visit with a kiwi from New Zealand, tours of the Bird House, watching the antics of the red pandas, and seeing a cavalry reenactment at the top of Calvary Hill. The CRC, nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, was once a training and remount site for Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders.

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Mouse gave many visitors their first glimpse of a black-footed ferret.

Meeting The Black-Footed Ferrets

Over at the black-footed ferret exhibit, Mouse provided a first in-the-flesh look at a black-footed ferret for hundreds of people. Some had been avid viewers this summer of the zoo's ferret webcam that featured Georgia and her kit Peanut. Other visitors had domestic ferrets of their own, but many of the visitors knew little or nothing about ferrets, domestic or black-footed. They all learned about the near-extinction of these animals, and their remarkable recovery.

Ferret keeper Lawrence Layman provided details on the animals in his charge. The CRC has bred ferrets for 20 years, and currently houses about 30 breeding animals, usually producing 20 to 30 kits per year. This year the number of new kits was down to seven — one being webcam star Peanut and another Brittle, a male born a day later than Peanut. Both are very valuable genetically, having been produced by artificial insemination with sperm frozen 9 and 10 years ago from now-dead ferrets. According to Dr. JoGayle Howard of the zoo's Department of Reproductive Sciences, this is the first time that frozen sperm from deceased animals has been used to propagate an endangered species.

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Asia, on exhibit the second day, was reluctant to leave her safe haven.

The Future Of Peanut And The Others

Just a few days before the Festival, Peanut, Brittle and Georgia were transferred to the National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center in Fort Collins, Colorado. The two young males will breed with an array of suitable female ferrets at that facility, and Georgia will be placed in a reconditioning pen until she is ready to be released into the wild later this fall. Brittle's mother, Rivendell, will remain at the CRC where she will be bred naturally next spring.

Layman explained why Georgia is a good ferret for reintroduction to prairie life. "She's one of the most aggressive mothers we've had, very protective of her kit. We think she'll do well in the wild."

In contrast, the more mild-mannered Mouse likes to sleep in the open rather than in a nest box or piece of corrugated black tubing like most captive black-footed ferrets; this would make her more susceptible to predation in the wild. Mouse, who never produced any kits, will be spayed and become a display ferret, used for educational events such as the festival and school programs.

Meanwhile, back at the webcam, the new star is Tilly, a young female chosen for no other reason, according to Layman, than that she has "a nice, friendly name." Tilly is one of six females at the CRC that will be artificially inseminated with frozen sperm next spring.



As for Ryland, he hopes to have a domestic ferret as a pet someday. Layman jokes that in a few years he can retire and let Ryland take over his job!

Linda Iroff is co-director of the International Ferret Congress and was a volunteer at the Black-Footed Ferret exhibit at the ACF.