

## A New Hope For Black-Footed Ferrets

**A black-footed ferret named Peanut and his mother, Georgia, are stars in more ways than one.**

*By Audrey Pavia*

Posted: August 25, 2008, 5 a.m. EDT

© Marylou Zarbock

Other black-footed ferrets in captivity also contribute to the recovery of the species, whether through breeding programs or education programs. To see Peanut and his mother on the webcam, [click here](#)>>

Lassie, Trigger and Benji are all well-known animal stars. But have you heard about Peanut, the famous ferret? Thanks to the Internet, this young mustelid has become quite a celebrity. Not just because he has his own Internet "reality show," but also because he is an extremely rare black-footed ferret.

Peanut's story begins long ago in the American West. Imagine a time when ferrets roamed wild on the Great Prairie, living out their lives in the majestic, wind-blown flatlands. Less than 150 years ago, this was the case for hundreds of thousands of black-footed ferrets (*Mustela nigripes*), that survived off the many prairie dog towns that dotted the landscape.

Today, perhaps 600 black-footed ferrets can be found in the wild, but this number is a vast improvement from what it was only 20 years ago. In the 1980s, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service captured 18 black-footed ferrets in an effort to save the rapidly vanishing species from extinction. These ferrets were considered to be the last of their kind.

How did the black-footed ferret go from being so plentiful to scarce in a relatively short period of time? The answer lies in the black-footed ferret's utter dependence on prairie dogs, which once numbered in the billions on the Western plains. When the U.S. government instituted a massive poisoning campaign against the prairie dog in the early 1900s in response to pressure from cattle ranchers, the black-footed ferret began to decline. Considered by cattlemen to be a nuisance, the prairie dog was the main source of food for black-footed ferrets. The mass destruction of these rodents meant the demise of the black-footed ferret. Disease also contributed to the decline of the prairie dog and black-footed ferret populations.

These days, the U.S. government is working hard to rectify the situation, and has instituted a captive breeding program designed to bring the black-footed ferret back from near extinction. This is where Peanut comes in.

### Product Of Science

On June 20, 2008, at the National Zoo and its Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Virginia, a female black-footed ferret named Georgia gave birth to a single male kit. The result of artificial insemination as part of the Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Plan program, this kit was chosen to be the subject of a ferret webcam.

Artificial insemination was pioneered in black-footed ferrets by theriogenologist JoGayle Howard, DVM, Ph.D., of the Smithsonian's National Zoo Department of Reproductive Sciences in the 1990s. Dr. Howard is spearheading the National Zoo's program to bring the black-footed ferret back from extinction.

"What makes Peanut even more special is that the sperm used to inseminate Georgia is from a captive male black-footed ferret that lived in the early 1990s," said Travis Livieri, executive director of Prairie Wildlife Research, an organization involved with the field reintroduction aspect of black-footed ferret recovery.

One of the primary tenets of the black-footed ferret captive breeding program is to maintain genetic diversity because so few animals were left to start with. Genetic diversity is eroding every year as the black-footed ferret captive breeding program continues, because all black-footed ferrets are very closely related at this point. According to Livieri, by bringing this old male's sperm back into the program again, it increases the genetic diversity.

Livieri explained how this works by using lemonade as an example.

"We are going to make lemonade," he said. "But we have only 18 lemons, and no more. So we squeeze the lemons and make one gallon of the best batch of lemonade possible. We have to sell the lemonade, but we will run out unless we water it down. We don't have any more lemons to squeeze. We water down the lemonade in order to sell more than the original one gallon. So our lemonade now is not as pure as the original batch. We take one of our original 18 lemons and



squeeze it again to 'reinfuse' the lemonade so it's not so watered down."

In essence, this is what the Recovery Program has done by using the sperm of a male that is no longer alive and hasn't contributed to the gene pool since the 1990s.

Besides Georgia, Dr. Howard inseminated three other female black-footed ferrets with this male's sperm. Georgia and one other female each produced one male kit.

#### A Star is Born

Since his birth, Georgia's kit has been closely watched by ferret lovers around the world. Courtesy of the black-footed ferret webcam, viewers looked on as he nursed from his mom as a young baby, and watched as he learned to eat solid food. They spied on him as he touselled with his mom, and scampered in and out of his nest box toward the end of each day.

"In early May, I started watching the black-footed ferret cam on the National Zoo's website," said Linda Iroff with the International Ferret Congress. "I posted about it to the Ferret Mailing List (FML), an Internet list with about 2,500 members, many of whom started checking in regularly."

It wasn't long before the little ferret had a name, thanks to one FML poster, Jill Brumley.

"The day after the kit was born, Brumley posted, 'I have taken to calling him Peanut because he is round on both ends and thin in the middle,'" Iroff said.

Over the next several days, others on the list began referring to the little ferret as Peanut.

"It took a few days for someone to realize how appropriate a name that was for the offspring of a ferret named Georgia!" Iroff said.

Iroff decided to use her connections with those in the black-footed ferret community to see if she could make the name official and to raise money through the FML to officially name the kit "Peanut." Iroff contacted Dr. Howard and Livieri with her idea.

"We raised \$1,000, which was split between the black-footed ferret program at the National Zoo and Prairie Wildlife Research," Iroff said.

As with any celebrity, Peanut's fans soon wanted to know the details of his life: what he ate, what kind of bedding he used, and his future plans.

According to the National Zoo website, Peanut is on a special diet for small carnivores that consists of raw ground meat. The bedding he sleeps in is called Alpha-Dry, and is made of wood cellulose.

As for Peanut's future plans, he will be spending a lot of time with the ladies once he grows up.

"Peanut is very special because of his genetics," Dr. Howard said. "This puts him way above when it comes to genetic diversity. He'll be breeding multiple females next year."

Audrey Pavia is a freelance write who specializes in animal subjects.