

## Black footed Ferret



**Scientific name:** *Mustela nigripes*

**Description:** The only ferret native to North America. They are 18-24 inches long, and have a tan colored body with black feet and legs, a black tip on the tail and a black mask.

**Similar species in North Dakota:** The related long-tailed weasel is about half of the size of the ferret and does not have the ferret's distinctive black markings. The weasel turns white during the winter months and is common state-wide.

**Preferred Habitat:** The ferret is associated with mixed and shortgrass prairies, and is always associated with large prairie dog towns. The southwestern part of North Dakota was home to the ferrets historically. Their former range was throughout most of the Great Plains.

**Diet:** The ferrets' main food is prairie dogs. Ferrets hunt mainly at night so they are hardly ever seen

**Life History:** In May or June, black footed ferrets produce one to seven kits that weigh only five to nine grams each. The kits are born in burrows created by prairie dogs and stay with the mother until around mid-August. The young become sexually mature around one year of age.

**Reason for Decline:** The main reason for decline is a loss of habitat. Much of their habitat has been plowed for crops. Black-footed ferrets are obligated to live in prairie dog towns and these towns have been reduced to one percent of their former range due to large-scale poisoning efforts and eradication programs. Prairie dogs and black-footed ferrets are also susceptible to diseases. All these factors contributing to such a great decline that black footed ferrets were once thought to be extinct until 1981 when a dog in Wyoming found one black-footed ferret. This led researchers to a colony of 18 individuals. From those 18 ferrets, the population has risen to about 700 individuals in the wild.