

# Black-footed ferrets released in Logan County

Nineteen rare black-footed ferrets raised in captivity were released on private ranch land in Logan County on Wednesday in the second release in Kansas.

Twenty-four ferrets were released on Dec. 18, by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Black-footed ferrets are among the most endangered mammals in North America, said Ron Klataske, Executive director of Audubon of Kansas.

The 19 ferrets released Wednesday — nine females and 10 males — came from breeding programs maintained by the Louisville Zoo in Kentucky, the Toronto Zoo in Canada and the Fish and Wildlife Service's National Black-Footed Ferret Conservation Center, near Fort Collins, Colo.

Six were released on property owned by Gordon and Martha Barnhardt and six on property owned by Maxine Blank. They are added to 14 released on the Haverfield and Barnhardt ranches last December.

Black-footed ferrets eat prairie dogs and live in burrows excavated by the ground squirrels. Ferrets nearly became extinct in the wild until 1985, when the last 18 known to exist were removed from a colony in northwestern Wyoming. These became the breeding stock for the captive program.

The creatures disappeared throughout most of their historic range as a century of poisoning eliminated prairie dogs until the population was a mere 2 percent remnant of their historic total.

The ferrets are nocturnal and difficult to detect, Klataske said. Four all-night surveys conducted in late August discovered three litters on the ranches in Logan County, with a total of 11 ferrets observed.

These ferret kits, along with a litter observed on the nearby Smoky Valley Ranch, are the first known to have been born in Kansas since



Southern Logan County increased in population on Wednesday when a group of people gathered north of Lone Butte to add 19 more Black-Footed Ferrets to the lands owned by Larry and Bette Haverfield, Maxine Blank and Gordon and Martha Barnhardt. The

state's last wild ferret was documented in 1957 — 51 years earlier.

Three years ago, five ranch families in Logan County, working in partnership with Audubon of Kansas, asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to evaluate their land and prairie dogs for an experimental reintroduction of the ferrets.

The most promising site has been a 10,000-acre block of ranchland south of Russell Springs owned by Larry and Bette Haverfield, the Barnhardts and Maxine Blank.

The properties offer a combined total of more than 5,000 acres of prairie dog colonies scattered in

shortgrass prairie.

"The three ranch families who are hosting this part of the western Kansas black-footed ferret experimental reintroduction are truly the 21st century wildlife conservation heroes," Klataske said.

"They are like the small number of people who stepped forward to keep American bison from being totally exterminated in the 19th century."

He said the privately owned ranch complex is as important ecologically as many state and federal wildlife refuges, but the rights of the landowners to maintain prairie dogs and

release was the second for the endangered ferrets who live in prairie dog holes and eat prairie dogs as their main source of food.

Photo by Audubon of Kansas

other wildlife has been challenged by the Kansas Farm Bureau and the Logan County commissioners.

During the past two years, opponents have filed lawsuits in an attempt to try to force the landowners to poison their property and eradicate the prairie dogs.

Kansas has a century-old state law that allow county commissioners to impose poisoning campaigns on a rancher's property with or without permission — and then bill the landowner or add the amount to his or her property taxes.

Klataske said in recognition of the importance of maintaining prairie

dogs on the ferret recovery sites, and the interests of surrounding landowners to control prairie dogs on their land, wildlife agencies and organizations are paying for the cost of prairie dog control on the lands surrounding the release sites.

Klataske said if other landowners in western Kansas are interested in initiatives to maintain prairie dog colonies for the benefit of that native species alone or to provide food and habitat for other wildlife,

Audubon of Kansas is always receptive to working with them.

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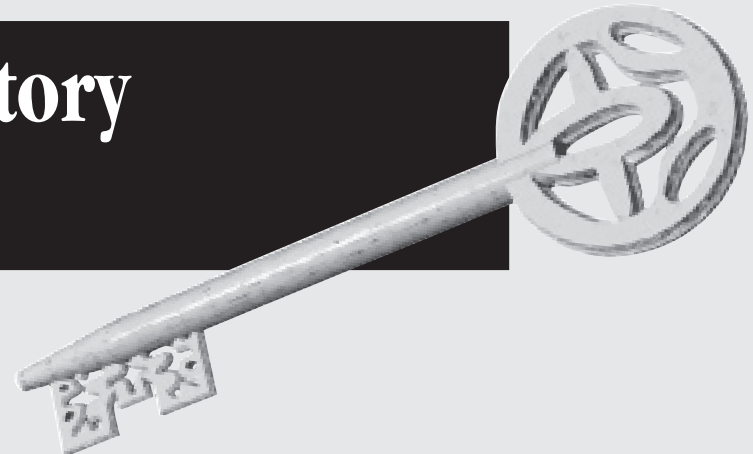
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