



**Ferrets will occasionally take a parting glance before diving into their new home.**  
*Photo by Jessica U. Grant/Wyoming Wildlife*



# HOME

AFTER DECADES OF SUPPORT FROM SCORES OF AGENCIES,  
35 NEW RESIDENTS RETURN TO THEIR ANCESTORS' TURF.  
BUT THE ROAD AHEAD FOR THE BLACK-FOOTED FERRET  
REMAINS A BUMPY RIDE

BY AMY BULGER

**H**unched over the small open cage in the dirt and prairie grasses of a ranch outside of Meeteetse, Allen Hogg's raised eyebrow nearly touched the place his cowboy hat met his forehead. He peeked in as subtly as he could for the wild thing that had buried itself in the black plastic tubing and piles of shredded paper inside.

Aside from camera shutters erupting like paparazzi in front of him, all was as silent as the tee-box at a PGA Championship. Allen's wife Kristine knelt beside him in the dirt. They stared into the cage. They stared at the prairie dog burrow in front of the cage. They've raised three children; they know how to play the waiting game with little ones.

The couple, their grown son Tighe standing close behind, and the finicky little bandit in the cage are entwined in a story about kinship and bloodlines and time; about how family is sometimes found instead of made.

September 26 marks the 35th anniversary of the rediscovery of the black-footed ferret, not far from where Allen and Kristine knelt with the cage. On July 26, a handful of landowners and biologists released 35 ferrets across 3,200 acres that is home to a robust prairie dog colony on the Hogg's Lazy BV Ranch and the neighboring Pitchfork Ranch, owned in part by Lenox Baker. Baker and his wife watched excitedly nearby, another cage sitting at their feet.

"This really is a conservation dream story that you couldn't make up," Baker said. "If you wrote fiction, then this would be as good as it gets."

More than three decades ago, a dog named Shep, who belonged to Allen's father John, brought home an ancestor of the ferret in the cage at Allen's feet. Shep started a saga spanning decades and generations of Hogg's, ferrets, neighbors and more than 30 federal, state, tribal and non-governmental agencies that have partnered to bring black-footed ferrets back from the brink of extinction.

The last 18 black-footed ferrets were trapped on the Hogg's ranch in the early 1980s in an attempt to save the species. U.S. Fish and Wildlife (USFWS) and Wyoming Game and Fish biologists then set to work together to hone captive breeding. With that success, ferrets have now been released on 27 sites across eight states, Canada and Mexico. In Wyoming, 502 have been released in Shirley Basin since 1991 and now 35 near Meeteetse.

A sharp, raspy yell shot suddenly from Allen's cage and the critter appeared inside the tube, a telltale muzzle like a mask peeking back up at Allen curiously. When finally this young black-footed ferret dove headfirst down the prairie



**Allen and Kristine Hogg wait patiently for one of the first ferrets to emerge from the crate and head into its new home.**

*Photo by Amy Bulger/Wyoming Wildlife*

dog burrow that opened the network of his new home, Allen smiled wide and tossed a meaty snack of prairie dog leg into the hole after it. His job was done. Now it was up to the ferret. Out here in ranch country one family helps another when they need it. That's just the way things work.

The endearing mug of what could be argued one of the state's cutest carnivores stuck in Kristine's mind. "When I got in bed that night, all I could say was a little prayer for those little guys out there," she said. "Gosh I hope they're OK. I've thought of that almost every night when I've gone to bed."

The ferrets' journey won't come easy. The road ahead is tenuous, pocked with disease that needs wrangling and a dwindling landscape desperate for more landowners like the Hogg's and Bakers to be their stewards.

## **PLAGUED BY PLAGUE**

**D**iscussions about black-footed ferrets cannot be had without mention of prairie dogs — neither in the rancher's field nor at the biologist's desk does one species exist without the other.

For many ranchers, prairie dogs are pests that tear up land and leave giant burrows. Black-tailed prairie dogs especially are known to be prolific grass clippers with dense





Wyoming Game and Fish employees walk back from a ferret-drop site after successfully releasing one of the last ferrets of the day as a line of media trails behind.

Photo by Justin Joiner/Wyoming Wildlife

populations. All five subspecies — black-tailed, white-tailed, Utah, Mexican and Gunnison's — have been blamed for eating the forage cattle need.

But biologists see a different animal — one ferrets depend on for survival that can just as easily be a doomsday prophet. It all revolves around the colony's health. A ferret's diet is more than 90 percent prairie dog, and it makes its home in their tunnels. But prairie dogs can carry sylvatic plague, transmitted to ferrets through fleabites. If the plague spreads throughout a colony, it can be as destructive to an established business of ferrets as an atom bomb.

Pete Gober has worked for USFWS for nearly 30 years and is the ferret recovery coordinator at the Ferret Recovery Center in Wellington, Colorado. Those who have heard him speak know his earnest explanation well: Prairie dogs had more than 500 billion acres of potential habitat before the U.S. was settled. So today's goal seems modest: to establish 3,000 adult ferrets on 500,000 acres of prairie dog habitat. He emphasizes that's one-tenth of 1 percent of the potential prairie dog habitat. Wyoming's share

of that is less than 100,000 acres of prairie dog habitat across the state's 62.2 million acres, and a few hundred ferrets.

"The West is old country, but the West has changed remarkably over the years," Gober said. "We changed the world when we put 300 million people on the landscape and

## IF THE **PLAGUE** SPREADS THROUGHOUT A COLONY, IT CAN BE AS **DESTRUCTIVE** TO AN ESTABLISHED BUSINESS OF FERRETS AS **AN ATOM BOMB.**

asked so much of the land. It was bad enough for plowing and poisoning to hit, but then strike three is plague. That was the near-death knell of ferrets."

The newest best hope to battle the plague is SPV, the sylvatic plague vaccine. Produced in a peanut-butter-flavored bait that prairie dogs readily consume, there is a large-scale distribution system being developed, a "contraption sort of



like a gumball machine attached to a drone that spits the vaccine out,” said Game and Fish Nongame Mammal Biologist Nichole Bjornlie. The largest future hurdle will be funding to produce and distribute SPV.

“We’ve got the captive breeding down. We know what ferrets need and their habitat, we’ve got that,” explained Zack Walker, Game and Fish’s nongame bird and mammal program supervisor. “Really the biggest thing looming over us is plague management and keeping prairie dogs healthy. I think once we figure that piece out, the rest of ferret management will come into place really fast.”

Currently midway through his career, Walker is optimistic that, if plague is controlled in 10-15 years, taking the black-footed ferret off the endangered species list might be something he’d see before he retires. Gober knows controlling plague is one step closer to successfully managing ferrets.

“What we’re trying to do is make sure the population is resilient and self-sustaining over time,” he said. “Where we get over that hump is when we have a number of sites that are managed for plague where we can start building without worrying about our legs being cut out from under us because we just can’t get past the plague.”

## ROLLING OUT THE 10(J) WELCOME MAT

**W**ith 300 head of cattle on the Lazy BV, the Hoggs are not unlike many ranchers around the state who might qualify to have ferrets on their land. They already co-exist with grizzly bears, wolves and other wildlife on their 10,000 acres and understand the potentially cumbersome regulations that go along with endangered species. It can take patience to run a livestock operation in the presence of carnivores that encroach on your front door laden with baggage of special management rules.

So why would the Hoggs invite in another?

“We wouldn’t have been on board if it wasn’t for that 10(j) rule,” Kristine said.

## BY THE NUMBERS

**27**

total ferret release sites across eight states, Canada and Mexico

**35**

Ferrets released at Meeteetse

**60/40**

percentage of female to male ferrets released in July

**85**

acres of habitat each ferret needs to survive

**90**

(days) average age of ferrets at the July release, also the age they reach sexual maturity

**100**

average number of prairie dogs one ferret eats in a year

**200+**

number of people gathered in the elementary school gym in Meeteetse in July to welcome the ferrets back to town

**280**

black-footed ferrets living in captivity

**537**

ferrets have been released in Wyoming to date



Two children wearing “Welcome Home!” shirts and playing with ferret plushies, listen to the ferret discovery story in Meeteetse before the release.

*Photo by Mark Gocke/WGFD*

Last October, the USFWS and Game and Fish finalized a rule unique to the state that makes it easier for landowners to host ferrets on their property. Rule 10(j) designates ferret populations as “experimental, non-essential” allowing more freedoms for landowners to manage their property without concern they might be fined for accidentally harming a ferret.

“We’ve lived with wolves, we’ve lived with grizzlies. Not a lot can be done about that until they’re delisted,” Kristine said. “But, making the ferrets an experimental species so we wouldn’t have to change our livelihood? That is really when we said, ‘Hey we can do this, and we will do this.’”

The Hoggs approached Game and Fish about hosting prairie dogs on their ranch, but their land didn’t meet the acreage criteria. Neighboring Pitchfork Ranch co-owner Lenox Baker also approached Game and Fish about ferrets. He too was short on acreage. Game and Fish did the matchmaking, asking if both ranches would consider combining their prairie acreage to make it happen.

“So far in Wyoming the landowner hosts are all volunteers,” Walker said. “Right now, we’re relying on people like them to keep the torch burning.”

Private landowner participation is so vital to the future of ferrets that Colorado Parks





Game and Fish Nongame Bird Biologist Andrea Orabona releases a feisty ferret on a ranch outside of Meeteetse.

*Photo by Jessica U. Grant/Wyoming Wildlife*

and Wildlife (CPW) is partnering with the Natural Resources Conservation Service on an incentive program to host ferrets, the first of its kind in the U.S. The state began reintroduction efforts in 2013 and has released 329 ferrets across five counties.

Ken Morgan, one of the incentive program's founders and the private land program manager for CPW, attests to its success. It offers ranchers a certain payment per acre to ensure a healthy prairie dog population and a domicile for ferrets. It's something Wyoming will look to model in the next few years, if funding sources are solidified.

## THE LONG WAIT FOR SNOW

**T**he goals for the black-footed ferret are many, one of the most obvious their eventual USFWS delisting. But Gober knows that could take time since the population shifts dramatically depending on drought and plague.

Still, he has a wish list for the next 10 years, including heightened plague management, establishing landowner incentives and de-emphasizing captive breeding in favor of translocation of wild ferrets. Mostly though, he'd like to see recognition for landowners. "Let's give them the credit they deserve for saving wildlife for all of us," he said.

In Wyoming, Walker wants a robust population expanding

across the state. That will require a statewide management plan and a strategic vision to release the right number of ferrets.

If all goes well in the next couple months on the Lazy BV and Pitchfork ranches, Kristine will take her granddaughter out on the first Game and Fish observation mission in September to see how the ferrets released in July are faring. While biologists conduct spotlight surveys, Kristine will introduce a new generation of rancher to a new generation of wildlife — both as much a part of the Lazy BV as the cattle that roam there.

It will likely be a chilly night as she holds her 9-year-old granddaughter's hand in the dark. Quietly, they'll stare into the abyss and wait for that telltale green glow of ferret eyes reflecting back from the lights. With those beacons, Kristine will know the prayers she said these summer nights were worth praying.

She already has an unofficial plan in place to keep track of the ranch's brood, just like a mother keeps track of her family when they launch out on their own. She'll soon start counting the days until the snow falls.

"I'm excited for the winter. That's when I can drive up there and see their tracks," she said. "And then I'll really know that they have made it."

*—Amy Bulger is the editor of Wyoming Wildlife magazine.*









# Next steps

**T**he black-footed ferrets (*Mustela nigripes*) released in July near Meeteetse are explorers. Right now, they're figuring out where they want to establish territories and Game and Fish's Nongame Bird and Mammal Program Supervisor Zack Walker hopes most of them will settle into the colonies.

"Some of the males might just say 'Nope. I don't want anything to do with this, I'm moving on.' They'll occasionally take off cross-country," he said.

Walker recalls one male ferret released in Colorado that traveled more than 100 miles from Fort Collins to Pena Boulevard near Denver International Airport, only to be hit by a vehicle.

He hopes the Meeteetse bunch — known as a business of ferrets — stays put.

Game and Fish biologists will revisit the ranch in September for spotlight surveys. They hope to trap some and put dye marks on their chests so they can easily tell which ferrets they've already studied.

"Next year when we come out, we'll be getting new individuals that we don't already have documented," Walker said excitedly. Those will be weighed, measured, tagged and vaccinated.

"Now is the time to circle our wagons and make sure the population we have really does well. I'm very optimistic these ferrets will be successful," he said.

One of the top three recovery sites in the country is at Shirley Basin in southeast Wyoming, with populations more than 100 ferrets in the fall each year. The other two highly successful sites are in South Dakota and Arizona.

Before the ferret can be delisted, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service criteria must be met. That includes the goals of having 3,000 adult ferrets in 9 of the 12 states of their original home range. Ten of those populations should have 100 or more ferrets; none should have less than 30.

Photo by Jessica U. Grant/  
Wyoming Wildlife