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Endangered Ferret Needs Its Prey, Furthering Ranchers' Woes

By [MICHAEL WILSON](#)

CANATA BASIN, S.D., July 20 - The beams of four spotlights swept the dust and rock and patches of grass growing like uneven stubble in the Badlands. It was a little past midnight, and the four spotters, biologists with the National Park Service, had fanned out in search of two little green eyes looking back at them.

"Nothing," said Doug Albertson, 36, a fat pack on his back carrying the battery for his 100-watt spotlight, electronic tracking equipment and - despite the hour - lunch, for the group planned to keep looking under the stars and full moon until dawn.

The green eyes belong to one of the most endangered mammals in North America, the black-footed ferret. It has a long body, short legs and a black stripe across its pointy face, like a burglar's mask, and lives and hunts almost entirely underground, peeking its head out like a periscope only in the small hours of the morning. There are believed to be about 400 of these ferrets in the country, half of them here, in the grasslands of the Canata Basin and Badlands National Park about 70 miles east of Rapid City.

Yet the ferret, an obscure member of the weasel family, is behind a longstanding battle between conservationists and ranchers over land use and government-sponsored poisoning and the familiar question of what comes first, working people or little animals.

It is not that people who live here have any quarrel with black-footed ferrets. Few have even seen one. It is the animal that the ferrets eat that is the problem, its formal name - *Cynomys ludovicianus* - surfacing in a recent flurry of back-and-forth lawsuits and government reports: the cute and chubby and insatiable prairie dog.

As the area has been struck by drought, prairie dogs have scampered over property lines and occupied neighboring ranches, devouring the vegetation on acres where cattle graze. Last fall, after a ban on killing prairie dogs was lifted, the federal Department of Agriculture poisoned 5,000 acres of the public lands in the Canata Basin. Ranchers applauded, saying prairie dogs threaten their livelihood. Conservationists, though, warned against further poisoning, saying it could mean another threat of extinction for the black-footed ferret.

A long-term solution was promised this year, and now, landowners and conservationists alike are waiting for that management plan from the federal Forest Service, expected as soon as next week.

Here, prairie dogs are derided as darlings of the tourists and city dwellers, who have been known to photograph them or to keep them as pets. Nonlethal means of relocating them come and go, like flushing soapy water into their holes - sending the sudsy rodents scampering out - and the so-called

Dog-Gone vacuum, invented by a Colorado man who saw a big, yellow truck sucking prairie dogs out of holes in a dream.

Charles Kruse, 46, pointed out a photo taken on his property in the tiny nearby town of Interior last year, showing men on a grassless patch of gray prairie-dog mounds. It looked like cowboys had landed on the moon.

"It just makes you want to throw up," Mr. Kruse said. "I care about endangered species, too, but we've got to have some common sense.

"I like ferrets, but I like people, too," he continued. "It'd be like a bunch of cowboys coming to New York and saying, 'Let's save the rats.' "

Mr. Kruse, a father of five, said he lost 70 percent of his combined cattle, wheat and hay business last year, and he and a few dozen other ranchers have sued and lobbied the state and federal governments to resume poisoning and recreational shooting of prairie dogs.

The Forest Service's plan is expected to spell out whether poisoning will be allowed, whether nonlethal plans will be ordered or some combination of the two. Appeals are practically a certainty.

Conservationists said the ferret's survival was their main concern.

"If we don't maintain this critical habitat, the ferret will not survive," said Jonathan Proctor, 37, with the group Defenders of Wildlife. "And if we can't do it here, we can't do it anywhere."

The black-footed ferret was already believed to be extinct by the late 1970's. Indeed, it seemed easier to track Bigfoot: scientists who had spent years looking had never seen a ferret. Then on Sept. 26, 1981, John and Lucille Hogg's dog, Shep, carried to their home in Meeteetse, Wyo., an odd-looking creature it had just killed. The Hoggs took the animal to a taxidermist, and word spread. The scientists hurried to town, several more ferrets were found and captured alive, and a complex breeding program began to bring the species back from the dead. Every ferret in the country today can trace its lineage to one of seven original ferrets breeding in 1988.

The ferrets were reintroduced to the wild in the Canata Basin beginning in 1994. They live in prairie dog towns, hiding in the maze of tunnels underground during the day and eating its sleeping inhabitants by night, living this way for about two years before they die, usually killed by a coyote. The basin has the only self-sustaining ferret population today. The ferret has become something of a mascot of the Endangered Species Act, a creature very nearly blinked out of existence.

"The bottom line, from a biological standpoint, is we have to have sufficient space or habitats for ferrets to occupy," said Mike Lockhart, 54, the black-footed ferret recovery coordinator with the federal Fish and Wildlife Service. "Even though it's the best, it's still very small, and it's still very vulnerable."

Prairie dogs, meanwhile, have enjoyed a population explosion here, for reasons more complex than simply the benign hand of government programs. In the 1990's, years of rainfall brought more grass, keeping the rodents fed without making them travel.

"Acreage shrunk, but density skyrocketed," said Don Bright, 49, a supervisor with the Forest Service

in Nebraska, which oversees the Canata Basin. "It was basically like they were making condos underground."

Coincidentally at that same time, the prairie dogs were feared to be a threatened species, and poisoning was banned for four years while an investigation ruled out that claim.

The years since 2000 have mostly been dry, and prairie dog towns have rapidly expanded over the landscape in search of food. "Those prairie dogs start eating themselves out of house and home," Mr. Bright said.

Suddenly, they seemed to be everywhere: Prairie dogs standing lookout over the mounds, at attention on hind legs, emitting a squeaky bark at the first sign of trouble. This was the sight, and sound, that greeted Mr. Kruse as he turned into his gravel drive at the end of the workday last year. "The prairie dogs were eating the prickly cactus," he said, still amazed. "It looked like a plowed field."

In 2004, the government began poisoning the prairie dogs, with ranchers and workers first laying out oats near the mounds, then substituting them with oats laced with zinc phosphide, which reacts with stomach acid to produce toxic gases. The mounds disappeared from Mr. Kruse's property, but he is not taking any chances on their returning, and has remained active with his neighbors under the umbrella name Nuisance Abatement Group. He is in favor of a proposed one-mile-deep line of poison along where private property borders public lands, and for shooting prairie dogs, but he adds, "They're a lot harder to hit than you might think."

Mr. Proctor, with the conservation group, called recreational shooting "enraging" and believes the poisoning to be inhumane. Besides, he said, neither are necessary: Prairie dogs cannot live in tall grass because their sentry-based alarm system will be useless. Therefore, deferred grazing, or a buffer of tall grass, will keep them out, he said.

Mr. Bright, with the Forest Service, is a chief author of the coming management plan, but he would not discuss its contents. "It's one of the tougher decisions I have made in my career," he said. "My stomach has churned, and I've gone sleepless nights."

It seems no one whose path crosses the ferret's sleeps much. In the Badlands prairie dog town around 3 o'clock this morning, one of the biologists, Greg Schroeder, 31, finally caught two tiny emerald-green ferret eyes in his spotlight's beam. The ferret ducked into a hole, Mr. Schroeder recalled later, and the group put a transponder ring around the rim, to read a chip under the ferret's skin when it came back out, so the team would know which one it had seen.

But the ferret, as if sensing all the commotion above, stayed under for the rest of the night.