

Ten captive-bred black-footed ferrets released near Vernal

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Wildlife biologists recently continued efforts to build the population of the black-footed ferret, releasing 10 of the animals in the Snake John Reef of northeastern Utah near Vernal.

The black-footed ferrets, listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as an experimental population, but considered one of the most endangered mammals in the world, came from one of six national breeding facilities where roughly one-third of the new kits are kept to breed future generations. The others are released in the wild.

Black-footed ferrets once inhabited at least 12 Western states, southern Canada and northern Mexico. The animals were declared extinct in 1967 when the last known colony in South Dakota disappeared, according to a release from the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR).

The rare animals were found in 1981 when a Wyoming rancher's dog killed one, revealing a nearby population. The small population grew to 129 animals, but crashed when distemper and plague sickened the ferrets and their main prey, prairie dogs.

The last 18 animals were collected in the mid-1980s and entered into a federal emergency-breeding program. An average of 300 to 350 are born in the breeding program each year with many more born in the wild as part of the reintroduction plan.

Utah and Colorado share prairie dog complexes and in the fall of 1999, officials released 71 black-footed ferrets in the Coyote Basin of Utah near the state line. Another 67 animals were introduced in the area in 2000 and, including the latest release last month, 313 ferrets have been released in the Coyote basin or the surrounding area.

The latest batch of black-footed ferrets are part of a study on a new vaccine that may protect the animals from sylvatic plague, one of the main reasons for the decline of the species. Vaccine results in other release areas proved successful in protecting animals exposed to the plague.

For more information on black-footed ferrets, visit www.fws.gov/species/species_accounts/bio_ferr.html.

* Watch a video of black-footed ferrets being released into the wild at www.sltrib.com/outdoors.