

READING PASSAGE 2

You should spend about 20 minutes on **Questions 14–26**, which are based on Reading Passage 2 below.

The Black-Footed Ferret

Species Profile

Ferrets evolved in Europe between 3 and 4 million years ago from weasel-like ancestors. There are only three ferret species on Earth: the European polecat, the Siberian polecat, and the black-footed ferret. The black-footed ferret is the only ferret species native to North America. They dispersed from Siberia into North America across the Bering Land Bridge. Over thousands of years of co-evolution with prairie dogs, their behavior and biology gradually changed to suit their environment. Scientists speculate that the species has probably been present in North America for at least 100,000 years. Data collected on ferret specimens indicate that this species diverged from its Siberian counterpart between 0.5 and 2 million years ago.



Classification

The black-footed ferret is a member of the family Mustelidae, which is often referred to as the weasel family. Other members of this family include the mink, badger, marten, fisher, stoat, polecat, wolverine, and domestic ferret.

Characteristics

Black-footed ferrets are long, slender animals. The average size is 18 to 24 inches long, including a 5- to 6-inch tail, and 1½ to 2½ pounds in weight. Males tend to be slightly larger than females. Female ferrets are called “jills,” males are “hobs,” and young are “kits.” Their short, sleek fur is a yellow-buff color, lighter on the belly and nearly white on the forehead, muzzle, and throat. They have a black face mask, black feet, and a black-tipped tail. They have large, rounded ears and short legs with long front claws developed for digging. The average life span of a ferret in the wild is 1–3 years, and 4–9 years for ferrets in captivity.

Behavior

With the exception of the breeding season and females caring for their kits, black-footed ferrets are solitary animals. They are nocturnal (most active at night) and fossorial (living mostly underground) predators. Black-footed ferrets have a variety of vocalizations, including chatters, chuckles, barks, and hisses. Young ferrets are quite playful and can sometimes be seen “dancing” above ground.

Reproduction

Black-footed ferrets mate in spring, usually in March or April, and gestation (length of pregnancy) is 42 days. The average litter size is 3–4 kits, although they can have anywhere from 1–10 kits. Females whelp (give birth) in vacant prairie dog burrows. The female alone cares for the kits, which are born blind and helpless. The kits develop their markings around 21 days of age and open their eyes around 35 days of age. They begin to come above ground at about 70 days of age and stay with their mother until fall.

Habitat & Diet

Black-footed ferrets are native to the North American shortgrass and mixed-grass prairie. They were once found in 12 states in the U.S., as well as southern Saskatchewan, Canada, and parts of northern Mexico. Originally, the prairie dog ecosystem occupied 20 percent of the entire western rangeland, allowing ferrets to cover a large geographic area. Today, less than two percent of their original geographic distribution remains. Wild black-footed ferrets are now found only at reintroduction sites.

Prairie dogs make up over 90 percent of the black-footed ferret’s diet. Black-footed ferrets spend the majority of their time in vacant prairie dog burrows. They venture above ground at night mainly to go from one burrow to the next to look for prey. The ferret enters a burrow and, upon finding a prairie dog, administers a throat bite, thus suffocating the prairie dog. One black-footed ferret eats one prairie dog every three days. Ferrets cache or store their food, thus minimizing aboveground exposure to other predators. The most common predators of ferrets are owls, coyotes, and badgers.

Conservation History

History of the Black-footed Ferret

Native Americans were the first humans to know about the existence of black-footed ferrets. Skeletons of ferrets and prairie dogs have been found in camps occupied by prehistoric Indians. Many different tribes, including the Sioux, Navajo, Cheyenne, Blackfeet, and Crow, used black-footed ferret body parts, skins, and furs for medicinal purposes and ceremonial adornments. Many tribes considered the ferret to be sacred.

Throughout their history, black-footed ferrets have been elusive. They were occasionally listed in fur company records in the early to mid-1800s. John James Audubon and the Reverend John Bachmann were the first to officially describe black-footed ferrets in 1851 from a single specimen found near the Platte River. They were so elusive to humans that, shortly after Audubon’s description, controversy brewed over their true existence.

European settlement across the North American prairie dramatically altered the landscape through plowing and prairie dog eradication efforts. As their habitat and primary food source diminished, so did the black-footed ferret. By the late 1950s, black-footed ferrets were thought by many to be extinct.

Second Chance Lost

In 1964, a remarkable discovery was made when a small population of black-footed ferrets was found in Mellette County, South Dakota. Biologists studied these ferrets and, after a few years, noticed the population was starting to decline. They captured nine ferrets and brought them into captivity in the hopes of starting a captive breeding program. The wild population died out in 1974. Unfortunately, captive breeding efforts were unsuccessful in producing surviving kits, and the last ferret died in captivity in 1979. The black-footed ferret was considered extinct for a second time.

The Rediscovery of the Black-footed Ferret

In an amazing turn of events, black-footed ferrets were rediscovered in 1981 near the small town of Meeteetse, Wyoming. A ranch dog named Shep brought a dead ferret home to his owners. The owners brought the carcass to a local taxidermist, who identified it as a black-footed ferret. The taxidermist called the wildlife authorities, who then surveyed the area and found a small population of ferrets. And thus, the Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Program was born.

Research conducted on the Meeteetse ferrets provided important new information on the life history and behavior of this secretive mammal. The population peaked at 129 ferrets in 1984. By 1985, biologists saw the population declining, just as it had in South Dakota. Canine distemper virus and sylvatic plague were believed to be the culprits. Between 1985 and 1987, 24 black-footed ferrets were captured in an effort to save the species.

The ferrets from Meeteetse were brought to a captive breeding facility in southeast Wyoming. Unfortunately, six of those animals died soon after from canine distemper. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began the captive breeding program with the only surviving 18 ferrets from the Meeteetse population.

Since 1991, federal and state agencies, in cooperation with private landowners, non-profit organizations, Native American tribes, and the North American zoo community, have been actively reintroducing ferrets back into the wild. Beginning in Wyoming, reintroduction efforts have since expanded to sites in Montana, South Dakota, Arizona, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Kansas, Canada, and Mexico.

Recovery of the black-footed ferret is attainable. However, there are still obstacles to overcome, including disease and habitat loss.

References

Black-footed Ferret Conservation Team. (n.d.). *Species profile and conservation history*. Black-footed Ferret Conservation.

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