

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FERRET FANCIERS FIND FREQUENT FAKES

An increasing number of pet owners are purchasing what they believe to be endangered black-footed ferrets, but are receiving another species instead, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

These misrepresentations, often deliberate, are quite costly to both the pet owner and the Fish and Wildlife Service. The animals being sold for \$200 and more are actually polecats, or European fitches, another species of ferret. Since true black-footed ferrets are protected by the Endangered Species Act of 1973, it is illegal to place them in interstate commerce. This summer, both biologists and enforcement agents of the Service were frequently diverted from their normal duties to identify and investigate possible violations. In every instance, the "black-footed ferret" turned out to be another species.

Like its cousin the black-footed ferret, the European fitch is a member of the weasel family but is more common and less expensive. Most purchasers use them as pets. However, they are also used to flush rabbits out of holes when hunting, a practice that is now illegal in most States.

The black-footed ferret is one of the rarest mammals in North America. It shares the same features as a European fitch--black feet and black face mask, but only the tip of its tail is black, whereas at least two-thirds of the tail of a European ferret is black.

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A black-footed ferret on a prairie dog hole in South Dakota.