WORLD DISTRIBUTION OF WILD DOMESTIC FERRETS

NEW ZEALAND AUSTRALIA EUROPE NORTH AMERICA

Feral Ferrets in New Zealand

About NZ ferrets	Introduction into NZ	Ferret Biology	Fur Market
Control of Ferrets	Threat to Wildlife	Ferrets and Bovine Tb	Prey Switching and RCD

WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT FERRETS?
Public Discussion Document
September 1999 (PDF, 446K)

"*The Department of Conservation is reviewing the regulations which control the farming, breeding and sale of ferrets and which allow ferrets to be kept as pets. This review has been instigated because of concerns that controls on pet ferrets are too loose and that existing controls on breeding and sale of ferrets are being ignored.*"

SYNOPSIS & ANALYSIS OF SUBMISSIONS RECEIVED ON PUBLIC DOCUMENT "WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT FERRETS?"
May 2000 (PDF, 264K)

Search the New Zealand Department of Conservation web pages and recent press releases for information about ferrets (*Keywords*: ferret, ferrets)

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What some New Zealanders have said about the ferrets of New Zealand:

...the original stock:

"*The average New Zealander who encounters the ferret in its feral state quite wrongly terms the darker ferret with its racoon-like mask to be a polecat. Polecats were not liberated in New Zealand, or at least no record exists of their liberation.*" - Jeffares (1986)

"*The earliest releases included many individuals with unnatural coat colours bred up by artificial selection during domestication, but most of these have reverted to the wild-type coloration similar to the polecat.*" - King (1990)

"*There are three major color variations to be had in New Zealand ferrets. The darker ferret with its white to yellow underfur and black guard hair is called the standard. This is the animal erroneously called the polecat."*

- Jeffares (1986)

"*It is possible that the original introductions included genuine wild polecats (M. p. putorius) as well as ferrets. There is much variation in coat colour, which Wodzicki (1950) took to mean that there were 'at least two wild animals to which the term "ferret" is frequently applied'; but these variations may be found within one litter (B.K. Clapperton, unpubl.). Most New Zealand ferrets are still docile when trapped, even after generations in the wild, which implies that there is little wild polecat in their ancestry (B.M. Fitzgerald, unpubl.)*." - King (1990)

...the subsequent impacts:

King (1984) wrote, "*So, surprising as it may seem, mustelids cannot be proved to be directly responsible for any of the shockingly long list of island populations of birds that we know to have become extinct since the human colonization of New Zealand, and they can be suspected of finishing off only a handful of South Island species and perhaps, the huia. By contrast, the record of cats is very black, and of man and rats worse still.*" Dr. King went on to explain, "*This is not to say that the mustelids were not capable of inflicting as much damage, or more: it is simply that they did not have the opportunity. The worst damage is always done by the first predators to arrive, which were usually men in boats (canoes or sailing ships) and the animals that they carried with them.*"

"*Ground-nesting birds like the rare New Zealand dotterel and extremely rare black stilt, flightless birds like the kiwi, rare lizards and insects are eaten by ferrets. Even the yellow-eyed penguin, blue penguin and royal albatross are not safe from ferrets. Ferrets love eggs and attack and kill chicks and adult birds - even adult kiwi. Threatened giant weta make a tasty snack and geckos and skinks are not immune from the dangers ferrets pose.*" - New Zealand Department of Conservation (1999)

"By 1900, ferrets were well established in the wild and definitely played a role in the decline of native birds like the kiwi, weka and blue duck, and the extinction of kakapo on the mainland." - New Zealand Department of Conservation (1999)

Introduced species like possums, rabbits, stoats and ferrets have proved to be an environmental disaster." - New Zealand Conservation Minister Nick Smith, Media Release, 15 July 1999

"*Ferrets may look like furry friends, but they are kiwi killers. If we are to save our natural icon and other important native species, we need to get serious about proper controls on ferret ownership.*"- New Zealand Conservation Minister Nick Smith, Media Release, 30 September 1999

"*Ferrets are an introduced animal which have a severe impact on New Zealand endemic and often endangered wildlife.*" New Zealand Conservation Authority, December 15, 1999

And what some pet ferret organizations have said about the ferrets of New Zealand:

...the original stock:

Some of the organizations promoting ferret pet-keeping in the U.S. have claimed that the ferrets in the wild in New Zealand are not true domestic ferrets. For example, they have been described as actually being "*wild European polecats*". A July 26, 1997, article claimed that ferrets, ferret-polecat hybrids, and polecats were released, and that the animals in New Zealand now are some kind of "*ferret-polecat hybrid*". According to one version, the initially released ferrets performed too slowly for effective rabbit control work, so the New Zealanders then had to release polecats and other mustelid predators. According to another story, when ferrets were first being transported by ship to New Zealand, they were mated with wild-caught European polecats, and the crossbred ferret/polecats were released.

...the subsequent impacts:

A 1996 article contained a claim that after decades of field studies, naturalists have concluded that the wild ferrets have "*not had a demonstrably destructive impact*" on New Zealand's ecology.

What are ferrets? - An overview of the ferret in New Zealand by the New Zealand Department of Conservation, 1999.

Ferrets are the largest of the three mustelid species introduced into New Zealand.

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The Introduction of Domestic Ferrets into New Zealand

Farmers demanded that ferrets be introduced into New Zealand to control the introduced rabbit, a serious agricultural pest. The first introduction included five ferrets released in 1879. - King (1990)

"*Ferrets were first introduced to New Zealand in 1879 to help rabbit control efforts. Many hundreds were imported from Australia and Britain later that century. Thousands were also bred locally, and released, up until 1912. By the turn of the century, after the ferrets had become widespread, they came to be regarded as pests, particularly due to the damage inflicted on wild bird life. Legal protection was removed and control campaigns began in the 1930s (Lavers and Clapperton, 1990).*" - Lugton, I.W. (1997), p. 96 (.pdf). Alternative search

"*Ferrets arrived in 1882 and the Department of Agriculture bred up large numbers for release. The Department also advertised widely in the British press for live stoats and weasels. Between 1884 and 1886, 4000 ferrets, 3099 weasels and 137 stoats were liberated. Runholders joined in the breeding frenzy.*" - New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Rabbit Biocontrol Advisory Group, 1996

"*Weasels never became abundant, but stoats and ferrets prospered. As feared by some, the stoats went into the bush and killed many birds - as well as some rabbits. Ferrets were still being bred for rabbit control in the 1920s.*" - New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Rabbit Biocontrol Advisory Group, 1996

"*Early conservationists could only watch helplessly as more pests, including stoats and ferrets, were introduced to control other introduced pests such as rabbits.*" - Bill Mansfield, Director General, New Zealand Department of Conservation, 1996

"*From an ecological and crop damage perspective, a number of the introductions were clearly major disasters. The rabbit was certainly one of these! Attempts to remedy the first mistake led to additional introductions, as early efforts at biological control, e.g. ferrets, stoats, weasels for rabbit control. These early mistakes, both in terms of the introduction of species such as the rabbit and possum, and subsequent introductions in attempts to control them, tend to colour our thinking about the potential value of biological controls.*" - New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Rabbit Biocontrol Advisory Group, 1996

"*There is no question that the introduction of rabbit predators (which, in the case of ferrets, have ultimately been very important limiters of rabbit populations) have also had disastrous impacts on many of our native birds. These predators, combined with unwanted introductions such as the three rat species, all helped to create concern regarding introductions.*" - New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Rabbit Biocontrol Advisory Group, 1996

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Ferret Biology in New Zealand

Range and habitat

"*New Zealand now has the largest known population of feral ferrets of any country. These are distributed over most of the North and South Islands, but are scarce down the West coast of the South Island, and they have not yet reached as far as the top of Northland on the North Island.*" - Lugton, I.W. (1997), p. 96 (.pdf). Alternative search

From Hickling, G.J. (1995)

- Ferrets are now found on more than half of New Zealand's land area.
- "*Abundant small mammal prey result in high predator densities in some areas (e.g., 550 per square kilometer for ferrets).*"
- "*Ferrets have been recorded moving 50 km* (31 miles) *within 4 months and red deer 32 km*."

"*Ferret ranges are over 31 ha for males and 12 ha for females*." (from Moors and Lavers, 1981).

Ferrets are highly mobile. "*Male ferrets have been tracked over 1.8 km*." (from Moors and Lavers, 1981).

"*In New Zealand, ferrets traditionally have been limited to pastoral habitats, rough grassland, riverbeds, scrub-land and the fringes of nearby forests. Disturbing information has been revealed which shows that ferrets are penetrating deep into the forests in Northland.*" - New Zealand Department of Conservation

"*The density of a ferret population in South Island pastoral farmland was estimated by live capture, mark and release, and by removal trapping, during March and April 1997.*" (Abstract) Cross, M., et al. (1997), Royal Soc. of NZ.

Dietary studies

Predator-prey interactions: studies on ferrets in New Zealand in relation to pest control - Landcare Research

Studies of ferrets, cats, and harriers in New Zealand's semi-arid high country showed that the ferret diet was dominated by rabbits. Lizards, sheep carrion, birds, invertebrates, mice and hedgehogs were also eaten, particularly in fall (April and June) when rabbits declined in the ferret diet. Distribution of all three predators was closely linked to rabbit abundance. Studies indicated that predators may limit rabbits in the study area but do not appear to regulate them. - Thesis, R.G. Mills.

"*The number of ferrets known to be alive on the control site naturally cycled with peaks in summer/autumn (due to recruitment of young ferrets and to an increase in trappability), and lows in winter/spring (due to high post-recruitment mortality and to a decline in trappability). Based on survival of radio collared ferrets, about 60% of the ferret population naturally dies off every year, so high ferret mortality is a natural feature of ferret dynamics in semi-arid New Zealand.*" - Predator-Prey Interactions and Impacts of Rabbits, Dr G Norbury, Landcare Research

In New Zealand, "*Night surveillance using night vision time-lapse videos was also used to study the scavenging behaviour of ferrets, clearly showing ferrets eating a variety of carrion including dead ferrets*."

Ferrets are scavengers. This is a factor in the spread of bovine tuberculosis.

Ferret diet pastoral habitats: The diet of the ferret was studied from prey remains in the digestive tracts of 277 live-trapped animals from Otago and Southland. Lagomorphs constituted 77% of the diet by weight and were identified in 65% of the ferrets sampled. Other important items were hedgehogs (*Erinaceus europeus*), possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*), and birds. - Smith, et al., *New Zealand Journal of Zoology*, 1995, Vol. 22: 363-369.

Also, see Jeffares, R. (1986). The feral ferret in New Zealand. *New Zealand Wildlife*, 10:43-46.

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Fur Market in New Zealand

Evaluating feral ferrets in New Zealand for use in the "fitch" fur market.

"*In the 1980s, ferret farms were established throughout New Zealand with a view to the export fur trade. When the fur market became unprofitable, most of these farms closed down. Ferrets escaped or were set free, allowing the invasion of ferrets into some of New Zealand's remaining prime kiwi habitat.*" - New Zealand Department of Conservation

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Control of Ferrets

Ferrets are trapped to protect vulnerable species, such as penguins and kiwis, although they are difficult to control. "*They are tenacious and wary creatures, which makes controlling ferrets a difficult proposition requiring considerable resources*."

In the mid 1990s, research on predator control program strategies was undertaken to protect a brown kiwi population from ferrets and other predators in Urewera National Park - The Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society (1997).

Ferrets and other predators had to be removed from the Karori Wildlife Sanctuary to create a "land island" fenced sanctuary for threatened wildlife on New Zealand's mainland.

A landowners agreement containing "*cat, dog, stoat and ferret-free conditions*" was made to protect kiwi and other native wildlife at Kerikeri Inlet, New Zealand, from threats of domestic pets in a new housing development. - The Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society, 1997

- Test of effectiveness of synthetic scent lures for trapping.
- Evaluation of bait markers in developing a baiting strategy for marking ferrets.

Vertebrate pests: impacts and future management - Phil Cowan, Landcare Research

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Threat to New Zealand's Wildlife

In the Northland farming area, "*The most prominent animal pests include deer, goats, possums, ferrets and rabbits. The browsing animals damage forests, farmland and native bush, and ferrets kill native birds and other small animals.*" - The Northland Regional Council, 1998

There have been concerns that current attempts in New Zealand to rid areas of European rabbits could lead to increased damage to native wildlife, because rabbit predators, such as the ferret, might shift their feeding habitats and feed more heavily on native animals (see "prey shifting").

Ferrets as Vectors of Tuberculosis and Threats to Conservation. Proceedings of a workshop organized by the Possum and Bovine Tuberculosis Control, March 1996.

Examples of Impacted Species

Weka, *Gallirallus australis*, or New Zealand Woodhen, a flightless rail.

Atlas of Species Distribution (select: Rails, Gallinules & Coots: Rallidae: Weka)

"By 1900, ferrets were well established in the wild and definitely played a role in the decline of native birds like the kiwi, weka and blue duck, and the extinction of kakapo on the mainland." - New Zealand Department of Conservation (1999)

The Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society (press release of Dec. 17, 1998) stated that "*there was a substantial body of scientific evidence on the impacts of ferrets. Forest and Bird also has first hand experience as ferrets were responsible for wiping out a small population of weka Society members had reared and released into the wild near Waihi.*"

Yellow-eyed penguin (*Megadyptes antipodes*)

Atlas of Species Distribution (select: Penguins: Spheniscidae: Yellow-eyed penguin)

"*The yellow-eyed penguin is confined to the New Zealand region and is one of the rarest of our penguins.*" ". . . *the biggest threat to the survival of the species is introduced mammalian predators. Wild cats, ferrets and stoats often kill chicks and take eggs.*" - New Zealand Penguins

"Ferrets, stoats and cats, all introduced, prey on the penguin chicks to a disastrous degree." - The Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust

"*The trapping of predators occurs in many mainland yellow-eyed penguin colonies to ensure the survival of chicks*." - New Zealand Penguins

Blue penguin, *Eudyptula minois*

Atlas of Species Distribution (select: Penguins: Spheniscidae : Blue penguin)

The Blue penguin, the world's smallest penguin, is found around New Zealand and Southern Australia.

"*Blue penguins are particularly vulnerable to the mustelids, and a single ferret may kill a dozen birds in one night."* - New Zealand Penguins

"*Predation by ferrets, stoats, cats and dogs has decimated many colonies.*" - New Zealand Penguins

Link to Penguin conservation in New Zealand

Brown kiwi, *Apteryx australis*, and **Little spotted kiwi**, *Apteryx owenii*

"*Two hundred years ago there were millions of kiwi living in New Zealand. Today the population is about 75,000 and this is halving every decade. Introduced predators, like possums, stoats, ferrets, cats and dogs are the main threat. The kiwi has also suffered from a huge loss of its natural habitat and is in real danger of disappearing from mainland New Zealand. One species, the Okarito brown kiwi is down to just 152 birds.*" - Dr. N. Smith, New Zealand's Minister of Conservation, April 1998.

Atlas of Species Distribution (select: Kiwi: Apterygidae: Brown kiwi)

Description and photos of New Zealand's kiwis

KEEP UP ON THE LATEST NEWS about the threats ferrets pose to New Zealand's national bird. Use the search page for the Kiwi Recovery Programme (*Keywords*: ferret, ferrets)

Ferrets eat kiwi eggs and kill adults. - Kiwi Recovery Programme

"*The first Operation Nest Egg-raised kiwi to be sitting on an egg has been killed by a ferret...*" - New Zealand Department of Conservation Press Release, 8 December 1999.

"Threats to Kiwi - Dogs, ferrets, possum traps and cyanide poison, vehicles and perhaps pigs, are the major threats to adult kiwi; and possums, stoats and microbes are major threats to kiwi eggs. As has already been noted, 95% of kiwi chicks do not survive the first six months, mainly due to predation by stoats and cats." - Kiwi Recovery Programme

The mainland island habitat of Trounson Kauri Forest supports "*the highest-density of North Island brown kiwi populations in Northland, under threat from a northward-advancing ferret population.*" - New Zealand Department of Conservation

"The ferret, also known as fitch or polecate (sic)*, is the largest of the mustelids and is not only capable of eating kiwi eggs and killing chicks, but can kill adult kiwi too. In one bush patch in Northland a single male ferret killed three of ten breading* (sic) *males and destroyed two other nests within a three month period before he was trapped*." - Kiwi Recovery Programme

"*A comparison of their surveys with those from 1970, shows kiwi noticeably dwindling in Northland, Hawke's Bay, Bay of Plenty and the West Coast. The decline in Northland coincided with the movement of possums and ferrets into southern Northland, the former inexorably spreading to the farthest corners of the country, and the latter roaming free after being released by disgruntled farmers following the collapse of the fitch fur industry in 1987.*" - The Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society, Forest and Bird, Nov. 1995

"*For adult kiwi, the greatest risks are dogs, ferrets, possum traps, cyanide poison, cars, pigs, and rarely, possums; chicks are vulnerable to stoats, cats, harriers, ferrets, and possibly weasels; eggs are predated by possums, stoats, pigs and sometimes weka.*" - The Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society, Forest and Bird, Nov. 1995

A research and predator control program was undertaken to protect a brown kiwi population from ferrets and other predators in Urewera National Park - The Royal Forest & Bird Protection Society (1997).

"*Little Spotted Kiwi were wiped off the mainland at the turn of the century, their small size making it impossible for them to fend off predators like stoats, ferrets and dogs*." - Northland Kiwi News, June 1997.

Ferrets are a serious threat to the large kiwi population in Taranaki forests of North Island. "*Stoats, ferrets, and cats are eating kiwi chicks in such great numbers, that it's extremely unlikely the kiwi population will recover without help.*"- Kiwi News, March 30, 1998.

"*In 1998-99 kiwi breeding season, a male ferret killed at least five kiwi over a few months before it was trapped and killed*".- New Zealand Department of Conservation.

"*...while kiwi were still present at all sites being monitored in Northland in 1999, they were down an average of 18 percent on the previous year. The decline has not been uniform around Northland although dogs and ferrets remain the main killers of adult kiwi, while stoats and cats are the main culprits when it comes to juvenile kiwi deaths*." - New Zealand Department of Conservation, 9 September 1999.

Black Stilt - *Himantopus novazealandiae*

Atlas of Species Distribution (select: Stilts & Avocets: Recurvirostridae: Black stilt) [photo]

" REASONS FOR DECLINE *Nesting areas have been destroyed by drainage hydroelectric development, (and by weed growth, tree planting and flood control programmes). Suffers from heavy predation, which is sharply increased by its nesting preference for dry banks, the favoured hunting habitat of introduced cats and ferrets. The species prefers habitat little frequented by stock.*"

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Ferrets as a Factor in Bovine Tuberculosis in New Zealand

"*The discovery that wild ferrets have a high prevalence of tuberculosis and observations that some outbreaks of tuberculosis in cattle and deer herds do not seem to be related to possums, has focused attention on the need to review both scientific information on ferrets, and farmer and pest controller experience with ferrets*." - Ferrets as Vectors of Tuberculosis and Threats to Conservation. Proceedings of a workshop organized by the Possum and Bovine Tuberculosis Control, March 1996.

"*Predators, particularly ferrets, are very important rabbit controllers. However, they are now also known to be infected with Tb in many places. They have now been officially declared Tb vectors. This means they can now be controlled under the Agricultural Pest Destruction Act (1967) until the Pest Management Strategy for Tb comes into effect. Control of ferrets will probably result in an increase in rabbits - thus more rabbit control.*" - New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Rabbit Biocontrol Advisory Group, 1996

"*Surveys show up to 30% of ferrets are Tb carriers. To remove this potential source of infection to New Zealand's cattle herds, the feral ferret population now needs to be reduced. This could be done directly by a labour intensive programme of poisoning and trapping, or indirectly, by cutting back its main food source in many areas, the rabbit*." - New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Rabbit Biocontrol Advisory Group, 1996

"The ferret population fell only slowly after the poison drop. Fewer ferrets were born or came into the area. Some older ferrets left the area, possibly spreading Tb, but most ferrets stayed put. Dr Norbury says that more research is needed before he can predict the effect the spread of ferrets will have on the spread of Tb." - The Authority (N.Z.), Sep. 1997

Other bovine tuberculosis information sources:

- Research in captive ferrets confirmed that Tb is transmitted from ferret to ferret. (1998)
- RSNZ News: Ferret cannibalism implicated in spread of bovine TB.(1997)
- "*AgResearch has developed a model for the study of tuberculosis transmission in ferrets.*" (1997)
- Ferrets scavenge dead ferrets, which may assist the spread of tuberculosis in New Zealand. - AgResearch, 1997
- Impact on populations of non-target ferrets of manually applied 1080 - Moller et al. (1996)
- "*Wildlife reservoirs of bovine tuberculosis in New Zealand*" - Graham J. Hickling (1995)
- Trap catch index for ferrets relating to transmission of bovine tuberculosis. (1998)
- Lugton, I.W. (1997): *The contribution of wild mammals to the epidemiology of tuberculosis (Mycobacterium bovis) in New Zealand*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. (.pdf). Alternative search

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Prey Switching and RCD

"*On 27 June 1996, the RCD (rabbit calicivirus disease) Applicant Group lodged an application to import rabbit calicivirus (hereafter referred to as RCD virus) as a biological control for feral rabbits with the Ministry of Agriculture.*"

[Note: RCD, Rabbit Calicivirus Disease, was formerly, and incorrectly, called RHD, Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease.]

RABBIT CALICIVIRUS DISEASE AND RABBIT CONTROL - Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

RCD - Risks and Benefits - Rabbit Biocontrol Advisory Group

Native Species and RCD: Species at Risk Fact Sheet / The Possible Effects Fact Sheet - New Zealand Department of Conservation

Studies of ferrets and RHD - Landcare Research

Radio-tracking ferrets and using global positioning systems to assess impacts of rabbit calicivirus disease (RCD) on predator populations in the Mackenzie Basin - Dr A. Kliskey (1998)

"*Studies of the impact of controlling rabbit populations on the ecology of wild cats and ferrets have indicated that ferrets, and to some extent cats, shift their diet to other fauna following rabbit control. Ferrets ate lizards, insects and hedgehogs and cats ate birds. Ferret and cat numbers declined slowly after rabbit poisoning: the main effect appeared to be on breeding. There was some starvation of ferrets, but not of cats, and little secondary poisoning or dispersal of either animal. It is estimated that about 60% of the ferret population and 30% of cats die anyway each year, of natural causes.*" - Predator-Prey Interactions and Impacts of Rabbits, Dr. G. Norbury, Landcare Research

"*Dr Norbury recently completed a study of how rabbit control with 1080 poison affects the behaviour of predators. At sites where 1080 killed 77% and 99% of rabbits, Dr Norbury found that ferrets ate fewer rabbits and more skinks, geckos and insects. The change in ferrets diet was greatest where rabbit control was most effective. The diet of wild cats in the area did not change significantly."* - The Authority (N.Z.), Sep. 1997

New Zealand studies were reviewed and considered at a workshop, and "*major habitat types, containing 20 native species that are vulnerable to increased predation when rabbit numbers decline, were identified.*" - Predator/Prey Interactions in New Zealand: Possible Impacts of RCD

"*We need to determine whether predator-prey switching poses a risk for threatened species and whether this threat can be alleviated by predator control.*" - E. Murphy, New Zealand Department of Conservation, Sep. 1998

"*Some rabbit populations are now 1080 and bait-shy, reducing the control effectiveness. In many areas, another important biological control of rabbits, ferrets, have Tb and may have to be controlled to prevent spread to livestock. If so, rabbits are likely to increase again in many areas. Other methods of control are therefore likely to be needed.*" - Rabbit Biocontrol Advisory Group

"*While predators, particularly ferrets, are an important means of rabbit control, they are also known to be infected with Tb (one of the country's greatest agricultural threats) in many areas. If it proves necessary to control ferrets to help reduce Tb in livestock, a significant increase in rabbit control will be required. The maintenance of ferret populations by rabbits also affects the conservation of native species, particularly ground nesting or burrowing species such as penguins.*" - Australia and New Zealand Rabbit Calicivirus Disease Program

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Feral Ferrets in Australia

Tasmania

"*An isolated population of ferrets exists to the south of Launceston in Tasmania. It is remarkable that the ferret is not more widely distributed in Australia, given it popularity for rabbiting.*" - Wilson (1967)

Queensland

"*Camels, horses, donkeys, water buffalo, ferrets, dogs and various rodents are also feral in Australia, although these are not seen as posing a significant threat to native species at this time. Environmentally many have the potential to be destructive and species such as the water buffalo have been subjected to severe control measures to minimise their impact on northern wetlands. To varying degree they all pose some threat due to habitat alteration, competition and/or predation and it is likely that some control measures will be imposed when (if) cost benefit analysis shows action to be either desirable or necessary.*" - Economically Viable Alternative Green, August 31, 1998.

"*Rising [feral] ferret numbers in south-east Queensland have raised fears for wildlife. Department of Natural Resources officer Nigel Gallas said Beaudesert Shire sightings had leapt from none to six in a few weeks and it was "totally illegal" for private people to keep ferrets.*" - February 20, 1999 - Ferret alert - Courier-Mail Brief

In Queensland, the ferret is prohibited as a pet.

Feral Ferrets in Europe

"Established feral populations resulting from escaped domestic ferrets are found in parts of Britain, especially on islands (Anglesey, Man, Lewis, Arran) and also on some Mediterranean islands (Sardinia, Sicily). They are not likely to persist as separate, recognizable forms where wild polecats occur." - Corbett and Ovenden (1980)

In Britain, "*Since ferrets are widely kept, escaped animals may be encountered anywhere and make it difficult to detect well established feral populations.*" - Corbett and Southern (1977)

In England, "*Feral ferrets (domesticated animals that have been released or escaped into the wild) are, unfortunately, all to* (sic)*common in this country, probably brought about by uncaring owners.*"

European polecats , which had declined drastically in England, has repopulated many areas in the latter half of this century, but "*there is widespread concern for its genetic integrity because of hybridization with domesticated, escaped, and feral ferrets (M. furo).*" - Judith M. Rhymer and Daniel Simberloff , Extinction by hybridization and introgression, Annu. Rev. Ecol. Syst. 1996, Vol. 27: 83-109.

- The Polecat Project, Cheshire Wildlife
- Hybridization study

"*On the island of Mull off the west coast of Scotland, where the polecat has never been indigenous, ferrets and polecats were both kept in domestication in about 1933-4; they soon escaped and interbred freely in the wild, before long becoming pests throughout the island where they preyed on rabbits, ground-nesting wild birds and domestic poultry*." (Lever, 1985). Recently on this island, there were reported ". . . *polecats, weasels, stoats, feral ferrets, rabbits, blue and brown hares and rats.*"

"*Feral ferrets are established in the wild in many places in continental Europe, being especially common, according to Roots (1976), in Sicily and Sardinia*." (Lever, 1985).

Ferrets are listed among the carnivores of the island of Malta, in the Mediterranean Sea. Here, the ferret "*...is an introduced form of the European species and has been kept in semi-domestication since ancient times, being used for driving out rats and rabbits from their burrows. Specimens in the wild are usually escapees from domestication*."

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Feral Ferrets in North America

The European ferret is included among the 28 species of exotic mammals of North America listed in the Revised Checklist of North American Mammals North of Mexico, 1997: "*Based on information presented by Hoffmeister (1986) and Jones and Schmitt (1997), we have added Mustela putorius, European ferret, to the checklist.*"

In the 1996-97 nationwide survey, respondents in six states reported being aware of domestic ferrets living more than a few days in the wild or suspected that ferrets had formerly bred in the wild. The following summaries describing free-living ferrets in three of the states is from material provided in conjunction with the recent survey or from prior material available to the Department and affirmed by the survey.

Alaska

Two healthy, free-living ferrets were caught by fur trappers in December 1985, and another one was caught in December 1986, in southeast Alaska. Also, a road-killed ferret was found near Ketchican in December 1985. There was no evidence of breeding.

This October 26, 1987 letter [Page 1 - Page 2] from Alaska Department of Fish and Game summarizes the information collected on these free-living ferrets. The letter was written by that agency in response to a 1987-89 nationwide survey of state agencies by California Domestic Ferret Association regarding the status of ferrets in each state. However, this letter was not included in the collection of state reply letters (mostly wildlife agency responses) in the report entitled, "50 State Survey on the Supposed Existence of Feral Populations of Domestic Ferrets in Each State." That report was part of ferret organization presentation packets provided to the California Fish and Game Commission for the August and November 1995 and February and April 2000 hearings on ferret legalization. Instead, the Alaska response letter that was included in the packets was an August 22, 1989 letter [Page Link] from Alaska Division of Agriculture, replying simply that they have not collected data on domestic ferrets in Alaska. This Agriculture agency letter was tallied in that report as being one of the 46 replies from "State Departments of Fish and Game (or equivalent)".

New Mexico

Feral ferrets were reported in the 1980s in several locations in New Mexico, mainly the result of legal, purposeful releases of ferrets in prairie dog towns as a biological control method.

The following letters dated October 7, 1987 [Page 1 - Page 2], October 27, 1987 [Page 1 - Page 2], November 6, 1987 [Page Link], and August 2, 1989 [Page 1 - Page 2], were provided by New Mexico Department of Game and Fish to representatives of two ferret organizations in reply to survey letters requesting or clarifying information on the occurrence of feral ferrets in New Mexico. None of these reply letters was included in the California Domestic Ferret Association report. Instead, a copy of a California Domestic Ferret Association survey letter of August 11, 1989 [Page link] to New Mexico Department of Agriculture, with a reply marked on it, was included as that state's response. As in the Alaska instance, this letter was tallied in that report as being one of the 46 replies from "State Departments of Fish and Game (or equivalent)".

Washington

On San Juan Island, Washington, a feral ferret population was discovered accidentally in 1974 (Stevens, 1975; Stevens, 1982), when domestic ferrets were unexpectedly caught in rabbit traps during a study of the European rabbit population on the island by the National Park Service. However, no research was conducted on the ferrets, the impact of the ferrets on wildlife was not investigated, and the presumed disappearance of the population sometime in the 1980s was not documented.

The European ferret is one of the species listed among animals treated at the wildlife rehabilitation center on San Juan Island since 1983.

State of California Home Page

The Resources Agency

Department of Fish and Game

Habitat Conservation and Planning Branch

Return to Domestic Ferret Issues in California

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