

TURKEY CREEK RANCH

Ranch helps protect endangered ferrets in Colorado

“**E**at well and prosper,” Gary Walker told a group of black-footed ferrets as he and federal and state wildlife officials turned them loose on his Colorado ranch. Plagued by an out-of-control prairie dog population eating the grass out from under his cattle, Walker turned to one of the prairie dogs’ few natural predators: the black-footed ferret. In 2013, under a Safe Harbor Agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the ferrets were introduced on Turkey Creek Ranch, which provided valuable habitat for the endangered animals as they simultaneously began to rein in the destructive rodents.

Tucked between Colorado’s growing urban community of Pueblo West and the U.S. Army’s 137,000-acre Fort Carson, Turkey Creek Ranch is an oasis of intact natural landscapes, native wildlife, and open space. The ranch is a family operation devoted to raising cattle and preserving the natural resources in its care. Thanks to the efforts of the Walkers, Turkey Creek is now home to one of the largest black-footed ferret populations in the United States.

Walker’s father originally purchased the first portion of the ranch in 1963. Since then, the family has continued to consolidate neighboring ranches and protect them from the encroaching asphalt. The Walkers’ efforts have more than doubled the size of their landholdings since the 1990s, and the ranch now encompasses 65,000 acres—a sizable tract of open land in an area of increasing development.¹¹

The Walkers have long worked to be good stewards of the land. In the 1990s, they discovered rare, indigenous plants—which are listed as endangered—growing in riparian areas of the ranch. They have since built 120 stock ponds and installed 12 solar-powered water pumps to keep cattle away

from the natural waterways where the endangered plant species are found.¹²

Turkey Creek Ranch is also home to many native animals, most noticeably the prairie dog. The rodents occupy more than 10,000 acres of the ranch, and even though prairie dogs are a natural part of the landscape, they can be destructive to pasture lands. “The grass grows back where my cattle graze,” said Gary Walker. “But where prairie dogs live the grass is completely destroyed, and it takes a long time to restore that land.”¹³ Whereas cattle leave about an inch of grass in the ground when they graze, prairie dogs strip grass to bare dirt.

Walker estimated that by 2013, 10,000 acres of his ranch were unsuitable for cattle grazing because of damage wreaked by prairie dogs.¹⁴ In response, the Walkers opened their ranch to the black-footed ferrets. A single black-footed ferret is capable of eating more than 100 prairie dogs per year, helping to limit the rodents’ population.

Black-footed ferrets were once thought to be extinct, until a ranch dog in Wyoming brought home a dead ferret in 1981. Wyoming wildlife authorities surveyed the area and found a small population of ferrets. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began a captive breeding program in 1985, helping restore the black-footed ferret population to nearly 800 across North America.¹⁵ Wildlife officials are now working with landowners such as Walker to reintroduce the species to its native grassland habitat.

Because the ferrets are listed under the Endangered Species Act, the Walkers faced a challenge in introducing them to Turkey Creek Ranch. Under the act, the federal government can impose strict



Gary Walker releases a black-footed ferret onto his ranch in Colorado (left). Black-footed ferrets face the threat of extinction, but they're finding new homes on private lands (right).

mandates when an endangered species is found on private property, and landowners can be held liable for any harm that comes to the species—a potential problem for the Walkers, whose livelihood relies on running livestock on the same ground where the ferrets would live.

To reduce their risk of having their ranching operations curtailed in the name of protecting the ferrets, the Walkers established a Safe Harbor Agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service. Under the arrangement, the Walkers would be liable if they purposely killed ferrets, but the family is protected if ferrets are accidentally killed in the general use of their land.

In 2013, Turkey Creek Ranch became the first active black-footed ferret relocation site in Colorado. Fifty-five ferrets, each microchipped to allow scientists to monitor the progress of the colony, were released over a 4,000-acre area to ensure that each breeding pair had enough room to roam.¹⁶

Successful ferret reintroduction is notoriously difficult. Once the multi-year process of creating a Safe Harbor Agreement is completed and the animals are actually reintroduced, two-thirds of all males and half of all females released in reintroduction

efforts die within the first year, and disease and drought also affect a population over the longer term. Today, 15 ferrets remain on Turkey Creek, and the Fish and Wildlife Service considers the reintroduction a success. It plans to release more ferrets to help boost the population to a more sustainable level of 30 ferrets.¹⁷

In an area threatened by expanding development, the Walkers have preserved their ranch as a home for both cattle and endangered species. The introduction of the endangered black-footed ferret on Turkey Creek Ranch demonstrates that wildlife and ranching can be mutually beneficial. Through a creative solution to the overabundance of prairie dogs, both the ferrets and cattle now have plenty to eat.