

Wild Again: The Struggle to Save the Black-footed Ferret

By David Jachowski. 2014. University of California Press, 155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400, Oakland, CA, USA, 94612-3758. 256 pages, 34.95 USD, Cloth.

As I read author David Jachowski's book, *Wild Again*, I envisioned a time when the Great Plains were undisturbed by human activity and all wildlife existed in their historical pre-European abundance, including black-footed ferrets and their prairie dog prey. This would be a time before diseases, such as plague and distemper, ravaged species that had not co-evolved with those ailments. Instead, my vision included large areas, many thousands of acres, of prairie dog colonies that had grazing animals, such as pronghorn and bison, on it and predators, like wolves and grizzly bears, following them.

Jachowski offers an engaging, personal account of his involvement in black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*) recovery efforts. Once feared extinct, rediscovered in Meeteetse, WY in 1981 (page 31-35), and still

one of North America's rarest mammals, this small weasel exemplifies the ecological, social, and political challenges of conservation in the West, including the risks involved with intensive captive breeding and reintroduction to natural habitats. As the jacket cover of the book indicates, the author draws on more than a decade of experience working to save the ferret to base his writings, and his unique perspective and informative anecdotes reveal the scientific and human aspects of conservation as well as the immense dedication required to protect a species on the edge of extinction. By telling one story of conservation biology in practice—its routine work, triumphs, challenges, and inevitable conflicts—*Wild Again* gives readers a greater understanding of the conservation ethic that emerged on the Great Plains as part of one of the most remarkable re-

covery efforts in the history of the Endangered Species Act. I couldn't agree anymore with that accurate statement and essential summary of the volume.

I greatly appreciated the personal focus of *Wild Again* which the author unabashingly states both in the jacket cover as well as in the *Prologue* section. Jachowski comments that the book is written for everyone and is not intended to be a comprehensive, technical review of ferrets (page vii), yet the 18 page *Further Readings* chapter at the end makes it very authoritative and comprehensive, in my opinion. One gets to learn of the highs and lows of being a field biologist and many of the author's experiences could be substituted for any animal, such as little funding, political influence and interference, difficult living situations, and self-sacrifice beyond most jobs. In my research on eastern coyotes/coywolves, I have often been criticized for being too personal and liking my study subjects, so it was very refreshing to read the commentary on conservation biology being a blend of advocacy and science (page 29). May be our politicians, including within wildlife agencies, will one day better appreciate that scientists are people too and should be able to offer their professional as well as personal opinions without fear of repercussions on their job and career security.

I was amazed that an author around my age (mid to late 30s) could have such of a developed and eloquent writing style, in addition to a well balanced perspective, as he wove many diverse accounts from personal to professional stories into one wonderful, easy-to-read adventure. For example, his beginnings as a child helping researchers at his father's Patuxent field research station, his late-night bar episodes, and his personal relationship issues of living on the Great Plains in isolation are captivating and mentioned throughout numerous sections of the text. And the descriptions of spotlighting ferrets at night, mapping prairie dog burrows during the day, detailing nuances of ferret behaviour (such as females testing males during coitus, page 97), trying to captive breed and increase ferret numbers, and conducting research in many different regions, from Montana to Mexico, made the over 200 page hardcover a real page turner. This is saying something considering that book sales and traditional book reading for my generation (and in general) are on the decline as the internet and information age produces news items (e.g., global warning, poaching, habitat loss) that seemingly change every few minutes, and as Jachowski explains (page 210), this makes it difficult for even professional conservation biologists to figure out what to protect and how to react to such large volumes of details.

While readers may be turned off by the apparent negative tone and unfortunate outcomes that are often discussed in *Wild Again*, such as plague killing off prairie dog colonies and people poisoning prairie dogs right at the edge of ferret recovery areas, I strongly believe that these occurrences must be documented and included as these are the personal and professional experiences of many wildlife biologists the world over. There certainly aren't always positive endings in the

world of wildlife research as evidenced by the fact that even after 22 years (1991-2013) and releasing more than 3,000 captive reared ferrets at 19 reintroduction areas, the black-footed ferret is only about a quarter of the way to being numerically recovered (page 212), which involves at least 30 self-sustaining adults inhabiting 10 different locations. Given that the main prey of ferrets, prairie dogs, are candidates for Endangered Species Act listing, it is not surprising that they still face a long and uphill climb, even with advocates like Jachowski trying to help them along.

The author (page 211) nicely concludes with a discussion of the direct, utilitarian benefits to humankind from conserving biodiversity, such as food, medicine, and water quality, yet he argues that sentimentality is another reason why we preserve nature and animals like ferrets and the prairie dogs that they depend on. Jachowski stresses that it is perhaps our most selfless act to try to preserve something when it is not in the strictest sense physically, energetically, or evolutionary beneficially to do so (page 211). Even though it is the law in the US to protect endangered species, I also believe that defending and helping to preserve a controversial animal is courageous given the usual hatred, prejudice and paranoia displayed to many endangered or politically challenging animals (see page 175-177). While I was shocked to learn that prairie dog poisoning is still allowed and practised in the US, and find it pathetic that this is a publically funded activity to this day, I found it entirely predictable that entrenched (and I would argue hypocritical) politicians will fight on the behalf of ranchers and farmers to continue such expensive, environmental destructive, and indefensible activities. In fact, Jachowski explained (page 175) that in South Dakota, hatred of prairie dogs still divides the community as easily as religion or politics does in other parts of the country.

The manuscript has only a few, minor grammatical errors, and most descriptions seem accurate and realistic for the locations discussed. There are pictures dispersed throughout the book which adds character and enables the reader to see prairie dogs, black-footed ferrets, and some of the locations where the author conducted research. However, not knowing the area that well, and doing what the author says most people do (i.e., flying over the plains from the forests [of suburbia] where I live to the mountains of places like Yellowstone Park where I vacation), I wish there were more maps to see the different places that the author visited and studied ferrets in (there is a map on page 158 but it is of four territories of female ferrets in his SD study area). Other than the lack of maps, my only other inconsequential complaint was really just three further questions that were not answered in the text but which I pondered: (1) Because the book was so comprehensive, personal, and well articulated, I wanted to know why Jachowski was no longer with the ferret team. I did find it entirely predictable for him to publish his findings after his decade plus stint studying ferrets, as expressing his views while still employed would

have likely (and most unfortunately) predisposed him to ridicule and possible even job firing as he described occurring for other people advocating for ferrets (e.g., page 160). (2) What about his wife mentioned in the acknowledgments (page 216)? He discussed other relationships he had, and how he chose the grasslands over the woman he loved (page 5), so how did he meet her? And (3), how was he able to move around so much during his job, such as to the Conata Basin of South Dakota from the UL bend in Montana. And why did he have to pay out of pocket for things, such as housing in SD, if he was working for the federal government? I wonder if he worked a part-time (seasonal) job with the federal government, known as a 1039 term position where one cannot work more than 6 months in a year, and then volunteered the rest of the time. These

three questions would have really rounded out the book, which essentially covered from his childhood to the present (2013, I believe).

As you can probably tell, if I am critical of such trivial details that means I really was enthralled with *Wild Again* and was able to comprehend every major section and storyline that happened within. I recommend it for anyone who is interested in wildlife, species recovery, and stories and adventures of this highly endangered and endemic North American predator, the black-footed ferret. It is a delightful read and well worth the time and money to learn about this little known and studied predator, and the grassland ecosystems and prairie dogs that it relies upon.

JONATHAN WAY

89 Ebenezer Road, Osterville, MA, USA, 02655