

New record of steppe polecat (*Mustela eversmanni* Lesson, 1827) in Northwestern Bulgaria

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The steppe polecat (*Mustela eversmanni* Lesson, 1827) occurs from Central and Eastern Europe in the west through southern Russia and Central Asia to South Siberia in the east. There is a severe lack of knowledge about the steppe polecat distribution in the Southeastern part of its area (SCHREIBER et al., 1989). In Bulgaria it inhabits only the northeastern part, where it is very rare. The steppe polecat is a strictly protected species in the country, with conservation status Vulnerable (SPASSOV & SPIRIDONOV, in press). Until now the westernmost record for the steppe polecat in Bulgaria was Chomakovtzi village (SPASSOV, 2007).

During a behaviour study of a European ground squirrel (*Spermophilus citellus*) colony in the region of town Knezha (43°29.92`N; 24°05.89`E; 147m.a.s.l.), we observed also a steppe polecat. This was a new record of this species in Northwestern Bulgaria, and confirms the westernmost known border in the steppe polecat's distribution after more than 30 years of absence of observations. It was observed on sixteen days during the period from 3 May to 19 September 2007. On 19.09.2007, two individuals playing together were seen. The steppe polecat was observed again in the spring of 2008. These frequent observations suggest that the site is part of a stable steppe polecat population area. The habitat is a large, heavily grazed pasture with a population of free-living European ground squirrels (KOSHEV & KOCHEVA, in press). The steppe polecat appeared in the midday hours, when it hunted ground squirrels. We made a photos and video films from a distance of 5 m. The species was determined on the base of exterior marks by photographs, using discriminating external keys.

The European ground squirrel is the main prey of the steppe polecat. In Bulgaria the European ground squirrel inhabits about 18 % of UTM quadrants in 332 localities (KOSHEV & KOCHEVA, 2007). For this reason we suggest that there is a great possibility to find the steppe polecat in other localities in Northwestern Bulgaria.

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