

## Prairie Dog Facts

North America is home to five species of prairie dogs:

### •Gunnison's prairie dog

Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Utah

### •Black-tailed prairie dog

Southern Canada to northern Mexico (extirpated from Arizona)

### •White-tailed prairie dog

Montana, Wyoming and Colorado

### •Utah prairie dog

Southwestern Utah

### •Mexican prairie dog

Central Mexico



### Threatened or Endangered Status

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service lists the Utah prairie dog as threatened and is considering the same for the Black-tailed. The Mexican prairie dog is listed as endangered.

### Prairie Dogs and Habitat

Prairie dogs are considered to be a keystone species, which means that the changes prairie dogs make in their environment affect many other species of plants and animals. For example, some plants that are rare grow on prairie dog mounds. These plants and others attract animals such as pronghorn to the prairie dog towns.



By digging burrows and turning over soil, prairie dogs mix the soils and improve soil aeration. Burrows are important for more than 140 vertebrate species, which rely on them for shelter, nesting habitat or food. These include burrowing owls, eagles, hawks, small mammals, lizards, and snakes. Some species, such as burrowing owls, live primarily in prairie dog towns.

Black-footed ferrets, a highly endangered mammal in North America, feed almost exclusively on prairie dogs.

Prairie dogs appear to adapt their social system to their environment, and change not only their density but their social structure according to the amount of food resources that are available to them.



golden eagle

### Prairie Dog Communication

Prairie dogs are excellent communicators. They have different alarm calls for different species of predators, such as hawks, coyotes, domestic dogs, and humans.

### Controlling Prairie Dogs

Traditionally, poisons have been used to control prairie dogs throughout the west and have contributed to prairie dog decline and being listed as threatened or endangered. More recently, people have begun attempting to control prairie dogs through barriers and habitat modification. In some cases it has been possible to relocate prairie dogs out of areas with human conflict.

### Prairie Dogs and Plague

Plague is a bacterial disease that was introduced to the United States from Asia in the early 1900s. It is transmitted by fleas. Because prairie dogs lack the ability to resist infections, they die within days of contracting the disease.

Fleas are often found in the mouths of prairie dog burrows, so reaching down into burrows can expose people and their pets to fleas. Allowing dogs and children to play in abandoned prairie dog towns may expose them to the possibility of contracting plague.



black-footed ferret



### Prairie Dogs and Livestock

The danger of cows and horses breaking their legs by tripping in prairie dog burrows has been overstated. Documented cases of this are extremely rare.

### Prairie Dog Reproduction

Prairie dogs are not prolific breeders. They breed once per year in late spring and have 3-5 pups, of which 2-3 will likely survive to adulthood.

### Shooting Prairie Dogs

Until recently prairie dog shooting was unrestricted in Arizona, but since 2000 the hunting season is closed each year from April 1 to June 15 to protect females with nursing pups.

Historically, some hunters believed they were doing the world a favor by killing prairie dogs. This attitude is losing acceptance as we gain new insights into the diversity of plants and animals that depend on prairie dog towns.

