

The Plight of the Prairie Dog

A new HSUS partnership aims to help these charismatic yet besieged animals



For some people, a prairie dog colony is nothing more than an underground nest of troublesome rodents. But Lindsey Sterling Krank sees something magical in the intricate warrens of these gregarious creatures native only to North America.

As director of the Prairie Dog Coalition, Sterling Krank savors the chance to observe and film the animals as they stand alert atop their painstakingly scraped burrows and chirp warnings of intruders to family and friends nestled as deep as 16 feet below. She enjoys watching them venture out to forage, bask in the sun, groom and kiss each other, and roll around in play. She's touched by their gentle nature, remembering an injured prairie dog who stroked her face while being rehabilitated during a colony relocation, his fear turned to trust. And she's awed by their essential role in the prairie ecosystem, providing food and shelter for a vast number of species. "I have never seen as much wildlife in one area as I do around a prairie dog colony—everything from birds to small animals to predators," she says.

But there's a dark side to Sterling Krank's close work with the animals: She has witnessed them being poisoned, shot for sport, or otherwise killed while their colonies are bulldozed and even blown up to make way for development. Considered "varmints" by many ranchers and farmers and their allies in government agencies, the five species of prairie dogs have plummeted in population by 95 percent following decades of persecution, loss of habitat, death from plague, and even capture for the pet trade. Today, they occupy less than 2 to

8 percent of their historic ranges, which once spread over vast areas in 12 states and portions of Mexico and Canada. Many scientists believe they may soon disappear.

Under the auspices of the Prairie Dog Coalition, wildlife biologists, activists, conservationists, and nonprofits are trying to reverse that trend—by promoting nonlethal alternatives to poisoning, seeking protections under federal environmental laws, educating the public about the importance of conservation, and even relocating colonies when no other alternative exists. This September, the coalition's work got a significant boost when it became a program of The HSUS.

The new partnership builds on the organizations' joint efforts in South Dakota's Conata Basin, which houses the largest remaining colony on public lands in the Great Plains and is bordered in part by privately owned cattle grazing land. Bowing to pressure from a handful of local ranchers and land owners, the U.S. Forest Service has poisoned hundreds of thousands of prairie dogs in the basin and surrounding grasslands since 2004—a detriment not just to their populations but to other species as well: The area is the most successful recovery site in the country for the endangered black-footed ferret, whose survival is closely tied to that of prairie dogs, their main prey.

Through a campaign launched in 2007, the Prairie Dog Coalition helped influence the Forest Service to dramatically reduce the poisoning, gaining a stay of execution for prairie dogs spread across



UNDERGROUND HOUSES

Prairie dog burrows include front and back doors, sleeping quarters, storage chambers, and even nurseries

16,000 acres in the region. The agency installed a fence partially funded by The HSUS and the coalition, with a tall grass buffer zone planted on one side. Prairie dogs avoid the grass because they can't see predators lurking there, says Sterling Krank; this natural barrier keeps them from migrating onto private land, where they could be poisoned.

The groups continue to advocate for peaceful coexistence in the Conata Basin and other areas. The HSUS's Dave Pauli, a longtime coalition member, hopes to set up demonstration colonies to showcase nonlethal methods of control; visual barriers keep prairie dogs from expanding their burrows, for instance, and features such as raptor perches invite natural predators. Pauli also encourages Indian tribes to replace killing with appreciation—by hosting ecotourists to observe and celebrate the species.

Poisoning isn't the only threat The HSUS and the Prairie Dog Coalition have tackled. They helped provide funding for the Forest Service to dust about 11,000 acres in the Conata Basin with insecti-

cide that kills fleas carrying the sylvatic plague, which can wipe out a colony in two days. And since 2005, The HSUS has been working to end killing contests, where shooters train high-powered rifles on the animals as they emerge from their burrows to socialize and feed. Legal in every state except Colorado, these contests typically award points for such feats as killing two or more prairie dogs with one bullet or flipping one through the air, says Casey Pheiffer, manager of The HSUS's Wildlife Abuse Campaign.

As people begin to realize the fragile status of the species in the modern world, scientists believe they've only just started to understand the prairie dog's character. "These animals have such endearing qualities, many of which are shared by humans," says Con Slobodchikoff, a biology professor at Northern Arizona University who has been studying prairie dogs for more than 20 years. "And the more we know about them, the more people will empathize with them and get the conservation message out."
— *Ruthanne Johnson*

The Dirt on Prairie Dogs

► **CHECKERBOARD OF PROTECTIONS** Prairie dogs are considered nuisance animals in most states. Of the five species of prairie dogs—Utah, Mexican, black-tailed, white-tailed, and Gunnison's—only the Utah and Mexican are federally protected. In Arizona, the only state that provides any serious protections to the animals, black-tailed prairie dogs were reintroduced in 2008 after being extirpated from the state. In northern Arizona, the Gunnison's species is subjected to an annual hunting season and may someday need similar assistance.

► **BURROW BOONS** At least nine species depend on prairie dogs for food and shelter, including endangered black-footed ferrets—who feed almost exclusively on them—as well as swift foxes, burrowing owls, mountain plovers, and ferruginous hawks. Overall, about 200 vertebrate species are associated in some form with prairie dogs and their burrows, says Con Slobodchikoff, a biology professor at Northern Arizona University.

The burrows allow rainwater to percolate into the ground, and when prairie dogs dig out and clean them in the spring, he explains, they churn and soften the region's notoriously hard ground, which in turn helps fertilize the soil and distribute plant seeds.

These advantageous structures are far different from the images of dangerous holes conjured by ranchers and farmers who claim that the burrows cause grazing animals to trip and break limbs. HSUS senior director for wildlife response Dave Pauli is surprised that this myth endures, as prairie dogs build high mounds around burrow entrances to prevent flooding, a sufficient visual signal for deterring accidents.

► **BENEFICIAL BROWSERS** Prairie Dog Coalition director Lindsey Sterling Krank says studies belie the long-held belief that prairie dogs compete with grazing cattle for grass. "Prairie dogs living in an ecosystem are not going to overgraze it," she says. "In fact, they keep out invasive species and maintain the native flora." The clipped blades resprout

into a more digestible, tender nutritional delicacy for large herbivores; cows, antelope, and bison actually prefer prairie dog habitat for this neat landscaping.

► **MASTER LINGUISTS** Prairie dogs have a sophisticated language system, says Slobodchikoff; they can describe to each other people's size and shape, as well as the color of their clothing, and they seem to remember when they've seen someone before.

Field studies have revealed prairie dogs also describing never-before-seen objects to one another, a feat that suggests a higher capacity for analysis than previously realized. "Perhaps prairie dogs have thought about the world around them," says Slobodchikoff, who conducted the research. "And if they do, then maybe they and other animals are a lot closer to us than we have given them credit for."



In addition to their complex vocalizations, prairie dogs communicate through smell and touch, often tapping each other's teeth in greeting.