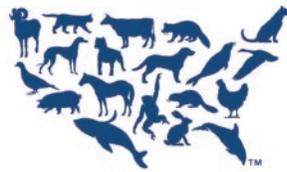




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(720) 938-0788



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

Fascinating Facts about the Prairie Dog

Prairie dogs are highly sociable animals. The critters often look like they are kissing and hugging, and grooming is a regular pastime. Burrows are much like homes possessing front and back doors, listening chambers, sleeping quarters and storage rooms. They are regular house cleaners too.

Prairie dogs have developed an advanced communication system with different “words” for tall human in yellow shirt, short human in green shirt, coyote, deer, red-tailed hawk and many other creatures. They can even coin new terms for things they've never seen before, independently coming up with the same calls or words, according to Con Slobodchikoff, a Northern Arizona University biology professor and prairie dog linguist. “So far, I think we are showing the most sophisticated communication system that anyone has shown in animals,” Slobodchikoff said.

Prairie dogs actually breed at a very low rate. They reproduce only once per year, and the average litter size is two to three pups. Confronted with barriers to expansion or years of poor vegetative growth, prairie dogs practice their own population control.

The grasses on prairie dog colonies are higher in nutritional quality than uncolonized areas, despite less overall quantity. Prairie dogs enrich and aerate the soil by digging burrows and adding fertilizer — their own manure and urine. Plus their constant clipping makes vegetation on colonies more succulent. The way prairie dogs graze and dig also increases water concentration and contributes to the overall plant and animal diversity in and around colonies.

The black-tailed prairie dog is incredibly important to the biological communities of the Great Plains. This industrious rodent enriches habitat through its burrowing activities in ways that benefit a multitude of prairie species. Some wildlife use their burrows as homes or as refuge from predators, and some prey on prairie dogs and other species inhabiting prairie dog towns.

The black-tailed prairie dog is a “keystone” species in the short- and mixed-grass prairie ecosystems, which has been documented extensively by biologists. At least nine species of wildlife depend on prairie dogs, another 20 opportunistically use prairie dog colonies and an additional 117 wildlife species likely benefit from prairie dog colonies to meet their biological needs.

Species dependent on the prairie dog are becoming endangered. The **black-footed ferret** is listed as “endangered” under the Endangered Species Act and is one of the rarest mammals on earth.

Mountain plovers and **burrowing owls** are birds highly dependent on prairie dog colonies for nesting and breeding habitat in many areas; both are imperiled and declining. The **ferruginous hawk** is another important prairie dog predator in serious decline and a “species of special concern” in several states. The **swift fox** is closely associated with the prairie dog ecosystem, and is considered very rare in its northern range. The species is currently protected in several states, but receives no federal protection.



Photo by Rich Reading

Soussan, Tania., 2004. “Scientists say prairie dogs appear to have their own language.” Albuquerque Journal. Associated Press

Southern Plains Land Trust has provided most of the information above. For a list of references, please visit: southernplains.org/refs3.html.