

Black-tailed Prairie Dogs

Land Stewardship Information Series

PRAIRIE DOGS IN JEFFCO

Identification

Black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) are medium-sized burrowing rodents with tan fur and whitish bellies. They are about 12-15 inches long and weigh between 2-4 pounds. The tips of their short tails have black markings.

Ecosystem

Black-tailed prairie dogs are found at elevations below 6000 feet, east of the foothills. They feed mainly on grasses and forbs but will occasionally feed on insects. They clip taller plants close to the ground to provide a clear view of their surroundings. The clipped grass is left on the ground or may be used to line underground chambers.

Prairie dogs dig tunnels below the soil surface. The tunnels are about 6 feet underground and can be about 15 yards long with two or more entrances. The system provides shelter, protection from predators, and nesting sites. The tunnel entrances are mound-shaped which prevents water from draining in and provides an elevated perch to watch their surroundings. Prairie dogs are active during the day. They do not hibernate but will stay in their burrows during extremely cold or hot days.

A healthy prairie dog town will have diverse and balanced native vegetation. In urban areas, many prairie dog towns are fragmented and confined by human development. As a result of this confinement, vegetation can become denuded and the resulting disturbance allows invasive and noxious weeds to predominate. These changes affect how the prairie ecosystem functions and can fundamentally change the plants and animals that live there.

Society and Reproduction

Prairie dog colonies include several family units called coterie. Each coterie includes 1 male, 3-4 females, juveniles and current year pups. Males leave their coterie at about 12-15 months old, but females stay within the family unit.

Males reach maturity by their second year and females within the first to second year. Litters contain 3-5 pups that are born in April-May. Pups spend their first few weeks underground. About 40% do not survive their first season due to predation and infanticide. The average lifespan for surviving adults is 3-5 years. Their highly developed communications and social behavior enable them to work together. Sentries alert the group when they see predators. Females work together to care for the coterie's unweaned young.

Ecology and Human Influence

Black-tailed prairie dogs are part of a complex grassland ecosystem. Jefferson County was historically within the short grass prairie region, with limited mixed-grass and tall grass ranges. Prior to settlement, prairie grasslands were home to a number of birds and animals that are no longer seen in Jefferson County including the black-footed ferret, swift fox and mountain plover.

Prairie dog towns would have moved across the landscape as vegetation abundance and health declined. Fire, flooding, and drought were natural occurrences and a large part of our grasslands' ongoing periods of rejuvenation.



QUICK FACTS

Size: 12-15 inches long

Color: Tan, white belly, black tipped tail

Lifespan: 3-5 years

Litter size: 3-5 pups per year

Diet: Grasses, forbs, occasionally insects

Habitat: Grasslands, 6000 ft elevation and below

BIRDS THAT USE PRAIRIE DOG TOWNS

Bald Eagle

Burrowing Owl

Ferruginous Hawk

Golden Eagle

Meadow Lark

Since human settlement, prairie dog range and populations have been reduced significantly. During the mid-19th century, much of the prairie grasslands in Jefferson County were converted to farms and ranches. Human development brought homes and roads. And invasive species began to take a foothold. Since the mid-20th century, much of Jeffco's grasslands have been converted to urban development. The remaining prairie dog habitat has become fragmented and altered so that what we see now is very different from when prairie dogs and bison moved freely throughout the prairie regions of North America.

Associated Species

Prairie dog colonies host several other species. Burrows are often used by snakes, burrowing owls, small mammals, and occasionally badgers.

Prairie dogs serve as an important food source for golden eagles, ferruginous hawks, coyotes, and foxes.

Plague

In the mid-20th century, plague was discovered in Colorado. Plague is a disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* and may be transmitted to humans by contact with saliva from infected animals and from fleas that have fed on infected animals.

Plague spreads quickly through black-tailed prairie dog towns, especially where the population is confined to small areas or where their movement is restricted by surrounding development. Keeping pets out of prairie dog towns helps protect them from possible exposure.

Management

Prairie dogs have historically been part of open and unrestricted grassland ecosystems. With the onset of human development, suitable habitat has become limited. Healthy prairie dog habitat includes diverse native vegetation with enough area to allow the animals to move freely.

Monitoring your site is essential to gauge prairie dog population fluctuations and to ensure that healthy and productive grasslands are maintained. Managing noxious weeds will help encourage the native grasses and forbs prairie dogs and other associated species need to survive.

At times it may become necessary to build barriers that discourage prairie dog movement onto neighboring land.

Dust may become an issue when prairie dog towns are denuded. There are state and local regulations that may require landowners to control dust from moving off-site. Consult with your local jurisdiction for more information.

As with any wildlife, it may become necessary to control or remove prairie dogs.

Relocation of prairie dogs requires a permit issued by the Colorado Department of Parks and Wildlife. Visit cpw.state.co.us for requirements. Relocation into a county also requires approval by the Board of County Commissioners (CRS 35-7-203).

Colorado Parks and Wildlife lists prairie dogs as small game that may be trapped or hunted. Visit cpw.state.co.us for more information. Local entities may have regulations that limit where hunting can occur. Contact your local jurisdiction for current requirements.

The Colorado Department of Agriculture designates prairie dogs as a destructive rodent pest under CRS 35-7. Land owners and land managers may control them when they pose a threat to agricultural, horticultural, or livestock concerns or to human health.



**Jeffco Invasive Species
Management**

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jeffco.us/jcism