



Prairie Dog Facts

◆ Two of the five species of prairie dogs are protected under The Endangered Species Act. Black-tailed prairie dogs have been granted a “Warranted but Precluded” Threatened Species listing, which means that biologically they deserve protection but the government does not have the resources required for enforcement at this time.

◆ Overall, prairie dogs inhabit less than 1% of their former range. New Mexico has the smallest remaining acreage of prairie dogs across their historical range. Best estimates on Gunnison’s populations are that they inhabit about 2% of their former region. This means overall numbers are dangerously low since their range is much smaller than that of the Black-tailed Prairie Dog. A surprisingly large percentage of remaining prairie dog colonies live in urban environments.

◆ Prairie dogs are known as a “keystone species”. Over 160 vertebrates alone are associated with large prairie dog colonies and over 80 on “urban” colonies. Possibly the world’s most endangered animal, the Black-footed Ferret, cannot live without prairie dogs. Some other federally protected species are nearly as dependent including the Ferruginous Hawk, the Burrowing Owl, the Swift Fox and the Mountain Plover. Biologists have termed them “perhaps the most important mammal on earth”.

◆ Prairie dogs are important to their environment in three ways:

1. They are the primary prey on rangelands and their colonies also provide a greater density of other prey species.
2. They provide homes or shelters for dozens of species.
3. Their positive effect on soil and vegetation conditions.

◆ Prairie dogs are annual breeders. About half of the females over two years of age will give birth to 3-5 pups in the spring. The overwhelming majority will not live six months.

◆ Prairie dogs are highly social and possess the most complex language of any animal ever studied. They display different calls for raptors, coyotes, humans and even humans carrying guns. They have numerous other calls totaling over fifty distinct “words”. Kissing, hugging and grooming are regular pastimes. Burrows are much like homes possessing front and back doors, toilets, listening posts, sleeping quarters and storage rooms.

◆ Poisoning prairie dogs is unacceptable. The primary poison used induces a slow, painful death that may take up to 72 hours. Other residents of their burrows suffer the same fate. Poisoning for population control is counter-productive. A mature colony left alone tends to expand about 2% per year. A poisoned colony expands at the rate of about 70% per year. Left to their own devices, prairie dogs experience their own natural population declines. They never undergo these decreases if we are constantly inducing our own, unnatural removal on their colonies.

◆ Shooting definitely has a significant impact on prairie dog populations. One heavily shot area was reduced by 10,000 acres in just a couple of years. Shooting promotes disease, discourages other species from hunting or living in the colony, and is not “hunting”.