

# The Real Dirt on Prairie Dogs

Coexisting with a Keystone Species: Useful Information for Town and City Governments, Land Conservation Organizations, and Urban and Rural Citizens.



Photo: © Richard Reading

## Why Coexist with Prairie Dogs?

In some places it may look like prairie dogs are thriving. But prairie dogs used to be much more common than they are today. Their colonies, which might have contained tens of thousands of individuals and encompassed thousands of acres of land, covered the American West from Mexico to Canada. Because prairie dogs have lost much of their habitat to agriculture and development and have been intensively shot and poisoned for over 100 years, they now inhabit less than 5% of their former range. The passenger pigeon was once so widespread it was impossible to believe it might go extinct. To prevent prairie dogs from going the way of passenger pigeons, it is important to coexist with them.

Prairie dogs are also crucial to the health of the grasslands. Prairie dogs are a “keystone” grassland species. More than 100 species depend on prairie dogs and their burrows for food and shelter. Where you see prairie dogs, you are also more likely to see eagles, hawks, burrowing owls, foxes, badgers, and other wildlife.

## Coexistence in Action

If you would like to investigate ways in which you can coexist with and/or non-lethally control prairie dogs on your property, the first question should always be: does this population NEED to be controlled? Learning more about the positive role prairie dogs play for the ecosystem and other species is the first step towards coexistence. There are many ways to live with prairie dogs:

- **ENJOYMENT.** Prairie dogs have a complex and interesting social life and provide habitat for many other species. If you enjoy having wildlife on your property, prairie dogs provide endless opportunities for wildlife watching.
- **BARRIERS,** including visual barriers and vegetative barriers, can minimize prairie dog dispersal into areas where they are not wanted.
- **RAPTOR PERCHES** encourage predation by native raptors – a natural limiting factor that constrains the size of a colony.
- **PREDATOR SITES** work for foxes, coyotes, and other ground predators the way raptor perches work for birds of prey. Strategically placed straw bales, woodpiles, or other habitat can allow predators to increase their success and in some cases aid in slowing or stopping colony expansion.

- **GRAZING MANAGEMENT.** Overgrazed pastures are actually favorable for prairie dog colonization – the prairie dogs can see for long distances without tall grass in the way, and they will dig for seeds to eat instead of grass forage. Rotational grazing to increase grass height can control prairie dog colonization in mid- to tallgrass prairie habitat.
- **GARDENING** or any disturbed soil is a big prairie dog attractor. Please place your disturbed soil areas out of view of the prairie dogs.
- **PASSIVE RELOCATION** is a carefully planned method of closing burrows so that prairie dogs move into an adjacent colony.
- **RELOCATION** removes prairie dogs and re-establishes them in a safe location.

## Prairie Dogs: REVEALED

### **MYTH: It is easy to catch plague from prairie dogs.**

**FACT:** Plague is transmitted to humans through infected fleabites. There are very few documented cases of humans catching plague from prairie dogs. In most of those cases the disease was transmitted by handling a dead prairie dog. You are more likely to be struck by lightning multiple times than catch plague from a prairie dog. To further reduce the risk, simple precautions to avoid flea and other insect bites while in or near prairie dog towns include wearing long pants tucked into socks, insect repellent containing DEET, closed-toed shoes, long sleeves, and a hat. Companion animals should also be kept off prairie dog towns. Plague can be treated successfully in humans with standard antibiotics. Prairie dogs, however, have no defense against plague, which was introduced to their environment in the late 1800s. A plague outbreak can wipe out 85 - 99% of the prairie dogs in a colony. Dusting colonies with insecticides to kill plague-carrying fleas can stop plague from spreading in infected colonies.

### **MYTH: Cattle break their legs by stepping into prairie dog holes.**

**FACT:** This is an extremely rare occurrence. Prairie dog burrows usually have a large mound of soil at each entrance. Livestock see this mound and walk around it to avoid stepping into the burrow.

### **MYTH: Prairie dogs breed prolifically.**

**FACT:** During the breeding season, females are receptive to mating for less than a day. Prairie dogs breed once a year and have between 3 and 4 pups per litter. Only about half these pups will survive past their first year. Prairie dogs do not breed until their second year, and live 3-5 years on average. Once the pups have emerged, prairie dogs form communal nurseries, like meerkats. This is why you may see a large number of pups in one burrow.

### **MYTH: Prairie dogs will outcompete cattle for forage – therefore prairie dogs and cattle cannot coexist.**

**FACT:** Prairie dogs evolved alongside another large herbivore – the bison. These two animals benefited from each other's presence, rather than competing. Prairie dogs' consistent clipping of the forage created a shorter, yet more nutrient rich blade of grass. Thus, in many grassland habitats, both bison and cattle prefer to graze on prairie dog towns.

For more information about prairie dogs, including references, contact Prairie Dog Coalition of The Humane Society of the United States, (720) 938-0788 or [info@prairiedogcoalition.org](mailto:info@prairiedogcoalition.org), or WildEarth Guardians, [tjones@wildearthguardians.org](mailto:tjones@wildearthguardians.org), [www.wildearthguardians.org](http://www.wildearthguardians.org).

