

NR6/125.13/1990/FALL/C.2

1990 Fall Compendium of Wildlife Appreciation Opportunities

Colorado's Wildlife Company

COLORADO DIVISION OF WILDLIFE

 Nongame and Endangered
Wildlife Program

 Watchable Wildlife Program

Dog A Prairie Home Companion



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black-tailed prairie dogs through binoculars

Watching Wildlife, Wild and Alive

Walt Disney did some wonderful things, but creating life-size models of wild animals that pop out of the underbrush, eat complacently, and roar on cue was not one of them. Disney's Adventure Land created a generation of people who expect wild animals not only to be available for human observation, but to remain in place and to understand that humans armed only with binoculars and cameras mean no harm.

Contrary to popular belief, wild animals are wild. They must give first priority to self-preservation and, let's face it, most wild animals consider human beings to be predators. Many animals people enjoy watching—deer, elk, bighorn sheep, antelope, mountain goats, moose—are prey species. Their eyes are located on the sides of their heads so they can watch for danger in front and behind while they graze. Most predators have eyes in the front of their faces; they glue those eyes upon their prey as they approach. What do deer usually see when humans want to watch and photograph them? They see two intense eyes in the front of a face that approaches relentlessly. This scenario does not represent safety to any animal.

From the animal's standpoint, it's easy to see why most humans need to tune up their sensitivity toward wildlife body language. They also need to change their own body language and give wildlife a more friendly message.

When watching wildlife, move slowly, if at all. Listen and watch for a response to your presence before doing anything. Let the animal dictate the distance from which you watch; do not move closer if the animal deviates from its normal behavior due to your presence. For example, if birds peer over the edge of the nest at you, or leave the nest and start circling and giving cries of alarm, you are already too close. Back away. If grazing mammals raise their heads to look at you, flip their ears, or



pronghorn antelope

swish their tails nervously, you are almost too close. Sit down and look at the ground. If they stop grazing and move away, you are already too close. Back away.

When you watch wildlife, don't stare at them intently like some two-legged predator. Amble slowly along looking at the ground; don't move directly toward the animals. Stop and sit for long periods of time. Use high-powered binoculars and spotting scopes to bring the animals close, while you remain at a distance comfortable to them. No wildlife watcher should move beyond a wild animal's tolerance for human intrusion.

The same kind of sensitivity should govern wildlife photography. Getting a great shot does not justify stressing the animals. A telephoto lens enables people to shoot excellent close ups without approaching wild subjects too closely. Although some cameras can be triggered remotely, setting up the camera and the intrusive presence of the equipment itself has caused birds to abandon young and eggs in the nest. Professional wildlife photographers have an important role to play in setting the example and in teaching students how to shoot pictures without interfering with natural behavior.

Watching and photographing wildlife is more fun and far more rewarding when the human is responsive to animal body language. When wild animals shape human behavior, the human becomes an "invisible" visitor. And observing natural behavior is what watching real, living, wild animals is all about.

Thank you to Andre' Duwall,
Wildlife Biologist, NE Region, DOW



The Surprising Truth About Prairie Dogs

by Mary Taylor Gray

Learning the truth about the controversial prairie dog means changing some common misconceptions. To begin with, prairie dogs aren't dogs at all, but rodents. These sociable ground squirrels, found throughout Colorado in grasslands and sagebrush scrub up to about 12,000 feet, all look alike to the casual observer. In reality, three different prairie dog species build and inhabit towns in Colorado's prairies, plateaus, and parks.

Prairie dog towns represent a more sophisticated social and architectural structure than evident from the surface. The town is a collection of townships or "wards" made up of numerous family groups or "coteries," consisting of a male, several females, and their young. Coterie members greet one another by "kissing." They play with and groom each other and defend their family territory from incursion by neighbors. Young prairie dogs, however, are tolerated by all community coteries.

A typical prairie dog burrow has two entrances. One goes straight down with a small listening post just below the opening, where the sentinel waits when danger is present. The other entrance slants down into the burrow system, which may be as much as sixteen feet deep, and leads to chambers for food storage, sleeping, and excretion. Multiple entries provide escape hatches and allow air flow (the straight tunnel works like a chimney). The burrow's depth keeps it cool in summer and warm in winter.

The familiar prairie dog mounds are formed when the rodents push dirt out of the burrow with their chests, heads, and forelegs. They pack the soil with their noses. (You can see their indented noseprints in the packed dirt.) The mounds provide vantage points and levees that can protect the burrows from flooding.

Anyone who has walked through a prairie dog town has triggered the prairie dog warning system — a series of alarm barks that are taken up and passed throughout the town. Eleven different prairie dog calls have been identified, including one specific to raptors. When danger has passed, a sentinel gives the "all clear" bark, often rearing on its hind legs, tossing back its head and jumping in the air as it yips.

Black-Tailed Prairie Dog

The black-tailed is the animal we think of when we envision a prairie dog. By far the most numerous and widespread of the three species found in Colorado, this species is larger than its cousins and is the most sociable. It communicates with calls and whistles, challenges its neighbors with territorial displays, and frequently engages in social grooming, "kissing," and play. Black-tailed prairie dogs range over almost half the state, from the eastern border to the foothills.

This familiar, tan-colored squirrel with the long, black-tipped tail is active year-round. It seems to rise and set with the sun. Although they stay underground during bad weather, when the sun shines on a winter day, the black-tailed prairie dogs are right back outside.

Gunnison's Prairie Dog

Smallest of the three species, Gunnison's prairie dogs live in mountain parks and dry, open areas of central and southwestern Colorado. They have a gray-tipped tail and are darker on the back than the other two species; the top of the head, sides of cheeks and brow are also quite dark.

The Gunnison's alarm call is a single melodic note repeated many times, unlike the barking call of the other prairie dogs. Gunnison's have a loose social organization, rather than the highly structured order of the black-tailed. And differing from the year-round activity of the black-tailed, the Gunnison's prairie dog appears to become dormant during the winter. It is uncertain whether they actually hibernate (lowering body temperature and metabolism), but they utilize fat stores rather than stored food.

Colonies of Gunnison's prairie dogs are usually smaller than those of the other two species. They do not construct a burrow mound but haphazardly kick soil out of the entrance; nor do they keep the entrance cleared of vegetation.

White-Tailed Prairie Dog

More yellowish than the black-tailed, with a shorter, white-tipped tail, this prairie dog is not widely distributed in Colorado. They live in dry areas in the northwestern part of the state up to about 8500 feet. White-tailed prairie dogs are much less sociable than the black-tailed, and like the Gunnison's, are dormant in winter.

White-tailed burrows are often found in stands of shrubs. The mounds are usually large, untended piles of soil with numerous entrances on one mound. White-tailed prairie dogs do not cut the vegetation around their burrows except for food.

A Prairie Dog Ecosystem

A familiar feature of Colorado prairies, plateaus, and parks, the prairie dog town is a focus for life and activity on the surface, in the air, and underground.

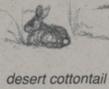
By Mary Taylor Gray

A community of settled prairie dogs is much like a village of hard-working peasants preyed upon by nomadic raiders and beset by squatters. The town of plump rodents is a mecca for predators. Owls, hawks and eagles drift overhead searching for a meal. Long-clawed badgers dig into the burrows after their prey, attracting opportunistic coyotes who have learned to capture rodents flushed by the badger. Other uninvited guests—mice, foxes, cottontails, bullsnakes, spiders and burrowing owls—take up residence in the convenient burrows. Researchers have identified eighty-nine species of wildlife that in some way are associated with the prairie dog town.

Prairie dogs provide a direct food source for predators, and their activities nurture an entire web of life. Prairie dog tunneling loosens and aerates the soil. Seeds and insects exposed by prairie dog grazing attract meadowlarks, lark buntings and other birds. Grazing also causes vegetation to grow more vigorously and creates a diverse plant community as other plants take hold among the grasses. This, in turn, creates habitat where other animals and plants can flourish. Recent studies have shown that "managed" grasses and forbs atop a prairie dog town are higher in protein and nitrogen and are favored for grazing by bison, elk and pronghorn.



hawk



desert cottontail



coyote



badger

The Decline of the Prairie Dog

Humans have only begun to appreciate the richness and diversity of the biological community fostered by the prairie dog town. Because such towns cover grasslands needed for agricultural production and often stand in the way of man's urban development, for decades prairie dogs have been shot, poisoned, trapped, gassed and plowed under. Only scattered remnants of the vast prairie dog towns that once covered western North America survive. (At the turn of the century, one prairie dog town in Texas covered some 25,000 square miles and contained 400 million individuals.) Although the prairie dog is common in Colorado, the entire species population—thought to have once been in the billions—has been reduced by an estimated 90-95%.

The decline of the prairie dog has, in turn, impacted animals that depend on the prairie dog for food and shelter. With their nesting sites disappearing, burrowing owls are declining. The black-footed ferret, though never abundant, is feared to be extinct in the wild. Raptors like ferruginous hawks and golden eagles, which depend heavily on prairie dogs, can also be affected. When part of an ecosystem is destroyed, the other components are also affected.

Snakes in the Neighborhood

On a largely featureless landscape, prairie dog burrows provide cool shelter from the heat for rattlesnakes and bullsnakes. As fall arrives, snakes seek hibernation dens in the burrows. Though they take an occasional young prairie dog, snakes are not significant prairie dog predators. Still the rodents do not welcome them. Prairie dogs often kick dirt over snakes they find in their burrows, sometimes completely burying the reptiles. As a parting gesture, the unhappy host seals the burrow with a dirt plug.

Sharing Burrows with Burrowing Owls

In April and May burrowing owls return to Colorado to nest in abandoned prairie dog holes until their young fledge in July. The owls enlarge the holes by kicking out dirt with their feet, then line the nest chamber with cow dung and plant material. The casual observer may overlook these ground-dwelling owls, so close are they in size and shape to their prairie dog hosts. They hunt by day as well as night, feeding on insects and small rodents. The owl burrows are typified by bones, pellets and food remains, unlike the clean mounds of prairie dogs.

Young owls learn to heed the warning barks of their rodent neighbors. When threatened, the owls make a rattling growl that sounds much like a rattlesnake. Though generally tolerant neighbors, the owls will sometimes feed on small prairie dogs, and the prairie dogs will eat an occasional owl egg.

Support Wildlife

Get Your Duck Stamps!

Wildlife watchers can contribute directly to Colorado and North American efforts to protect and conserve vanishing wildlife habitat. Colorado duck stamps and limited edition prints will raise money for waterfowl habitat, thus benefiting hundreds of nongame species and huntable ducks and geese. You can purchase \$5.00 duck stamps from Division of Wildlife offices or sporting goods stores. The prints can be purchased for \$169.00 from Colorado Women for Wetlands (745-1820) or wildlife art dealers.



black-footed ferret

Buy Your Wildlife Brochures!

Watching Wildlife Close to Home. Detailed map highlights 20 of the best sites to view wildlife near Denver. Published by DOW, \$3.00. Money goes to Watchable Wildlife Program. (291-7230).

Guide to Viewing Bighorn Sheep. Map and information regarding 30 sites to see bighorns in Colorado. Published by DOW, \$3.00. Money goes to Watchable Wildlife Program. (297-1192).

What's Missing From This Picture?

A slender, bandit-masked predator once lived as an unwelcome guest in prairie dog towns, slipping down the tunnels at night to hunt its hapless host. Although its prey base numbered in the billions and covered thousands of square miles, man's impact came too quickly for this specialized predator to adapt. Today, the black-footed ferret is missing from the prairie dog ecosystem.

Prairie dog populations began to decline years ago due to poisoning and habitat loss. Black-footed ferrets disappeared along with the prairie dog. In the late 1970s, the only known population of black-footed ferrets was hit by canine distemper and reduced to twelve individuals. They were captured, added to the six already held in a captive breeding facility, and eighteen black-footed ferrets were known to be left in the world.

The captive breeding program has been successful, increasing the carefully managed population from eighteen to about 200 in just three-and-a-half years. The first wild release of ferrets is scheduled for Wyoming in 1991, with a Colorado release targeted for 1992 - 1994.

Black-footed ferrets will be reintroduced to prairie dog towns, but their survival is far from guaranteed. Biologists wonder about the future of the prairie dog ecosystem and all of its interrelated inhabitants. The black-footed ferret may thrive once reintroduced to the wild, thus signaling an ecosystem recovery. Or it may simply be the first of an entire community to disappear from the face of the earth. The future of the black-footed ferret and the prairie dog ecosystem is up to you.



burrowing owl



bullsnake

prairie dog

The Carrier Pigeon

Dear Editor:

Your answer to C. Raymer's letter prompts me to respond to some of the questions you posed to him. The Division of Wildlife has long been viewed by non-consumptive users of wildlife as a governmental agency for, by, and of hunters, trappers, and fishermen. The DOW is primarily funded by these special interest groups, so it is a natural good old boys system of patting one another on the back. Colorado's growing, urbanizing, increasingly educated and aging population suggests that numbers of consumptive wildlife users will plateau, while non-consumptive users will continue to grow as fast or faster than the population.

The writing is on the wall. The DOW should already be planning for this demographic trend by moving to put into place new sources of income from non-consumptive users of wildlife, such as taxes on camping and hiking gear, cameras, binoculars, ski equipment,

etc. If the DOW provides people who do not hunt, fish or trap with an opportunity to put their money where their mouths are, it will see a shift in emphasis from consumptive to non-consumptive use of wildlife, and the will of all of Colorado's people will be served, not just that of hunters, trappers and fishermen.

Sincerely,

Diane J. Brown
Nederland, Colorado

Dear Diane,

You certainly hit that nail on the head. For more than 50 years, hunters and fishermen have been the primary supporters of wildlife conservation in Colorado. There definitely needs to be opportunity for people who do not hunt, fish, or trap to financially support the wildlife they value.

Toward that goal, Governor Romer's Great Outdoors Colorado! citizen's committee has been holding public meetings throughout the state and will be making recommendations to the governor in early December. GO Colorado! is charged with identifying needs and recommending solutions for funding wildlife, open space, and outdoor recreation in Colorado. I hope you and other people willing to express good ideas will write to David Harrison, Chairman, Great Outdoors Colorado!, 1313 Sherman, Room 718, Denver, CO 80203. For more information, call Patsy Goodman, State Wildlife Manager, DOW, 291-7346.

You might also look at the "Support Wildlife" section in this issue.

Editor

Calling All Parts of Colorado

What is GO Colorado!? Presentation by Judy Sheppard, Nongame Biologist, DOW. Sunday, October 14 at 1:00 p.m. at Barr Lake Nature Center (659-1160).

Birdwatching Nature Walks. Wednesday and Saturday mornings, 8:00 - 11:00 a.m., at Barr Lake State Park. Colorado Bird Observatory and Rocky Mountain Nature Association. Register for walks 24 hours in advance. Michael Carter 659-4348.

Winter Bird Feeding Workshops. Saturday, October 13 at 1:00 p.m. and Sunday, November 14 at 1:00 p.m. at Barr Lake Nature Center (659-1160).

Learn About Bats! Friday, October 26 at 6:30 p.m. at Barr Lake Nature Center (659-1160).

Halloween Happening! Sunday, October 28, 4:00 - 5:30 p.m. at Barr Lake Nature Center. Especially for children ages 4 - 10 and their families (659-1160).



Keep Your Eyes Peeled

SW Region - Beginning in mid-October you'll be able to see about 20,000 migrating sandhill cranes, a few whooping cranes, thousands of waterfowl and other birds, and a bunch of bald eagles. Look for them at the Russell Lakes and Monte Vista State Wildlife Areas, Alamosa and Monte Vista National Wildlife Refuges, and other locations throughout the San Luis Valley.



greater sandhill cranes

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