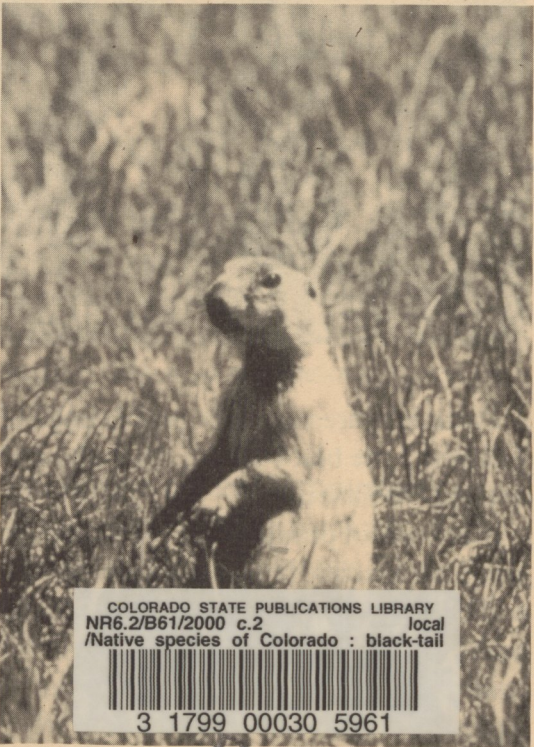


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# Native Species of Colorado: Black-Tailed Prairie Dog



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## Native species of Colorado: Black-tailed prairie dog

Scientific Name:

*Cynomys ludovicianus*



There are three kinds of prairie dogs in Colorado: the black-tailed, the white-tailed and the Gunnison.

Black-tailed prairie dogs, by far the most common species, populate the Front Range and eastern plains. Although they are called prairie dogs, they are members of the squirrel family, which includes ground squirrels, chipmunks, marmots and tree squirrels.

### Physical description

Prairie dogs are tan or light brown, helping them to blend in with their habitat so raptors and other predators do not see them. They have sharp teeth and black-tipped tails. Adults weigh from one to three pounds and are 14 to 17 inches long.

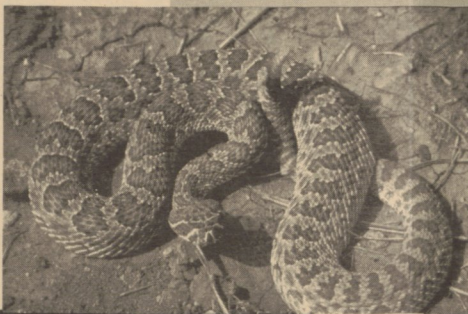
### Reproduction

Black-tailed prairie dog females have only one litter each year. Breeding occurs from late January to early March.

Gestation averages 28 to 35 days. Most young are born in March and April. The typical number born to one mother is three to five pups, but there can be as many as eight in a litter.

Newborn prairie dogs are blind, hairless and helpless at birth. They remain in the burrow for four to seven weeks

(until May or June). Their eyes open at about five weeks of age. Although tiny at birth, weight gain is rapid and by fall, most young weigh nearly as much as adult prairie dogs. Black-tailed prairie dogs



*Many other wildlife species interact with, or depend on, prairie dog towns for their survival.*

have a life-span of three to five years in the wild.

### Where they live

Black-tailed prairie dogs historically lived on the Great Plains in communities called "towns" that vary in size. While prairie dogs can still be found on prairies today, they can also be found on undisturbed land with soil that is suitable for burrowing (such as clay mixtures), even in urban and developing areas. Although prairie dogs do not often burrow on land that is actively farmed, when cultivation ends, prairie dogs

can return quickly.

Black-tailed prairie dogs are known for creating elaborate underground burrows. Studies have found towns with as few as 10 individuals and as many as several hundred. Within the towns, prairie dogs are divided into smaller social units called coterie. Coterie generally include one male, several adult females and their young. After their first winter, young males may leave home and join another coterie.

Prairie dogs communicate with each other using a variety of calls, especially the "alarm" or "bark" to alert the community to danger. Black-tailed prairie dogs are active during daylight all year. However, during periods of cold or inclement weather, they may stay below ground for several days.

### Shortgrass prairie ecosystem

Prairie dogs are an integral part of shortgrass prairie ecosystems. Many other wildlife species, including black-footed ferrets, prairie rattlesnakes, burrowing owls, foxes, eagles, hawks, badgers and weasels interact with, or depend on, prairie dog towns for their survival.

Prairie dogs eat grass, seeds and some insects. Prairie dogs play an important role in their ecosystem by creating islands of unique habitat in a sea of grasslands.

Prairie dogs' daily activities change the physical characteristics of the community, which leads to increased plant and animal diversity.

Black-tailed prairie dogs provide a variety of wildlife-related recreational opportunities to many people.

The presence of large, healthy prairie dog towns is not always compatible with agriculture and other human land-use interests, but coexistence is possible by striving to conserve prairie dog ecosystems and populations at tolerable levels. Proper management can ensure that the complex community of plants and animals supported by and dependent on prairie dogs can continue to meet at the crossroads of the prairie.

### Public safety issues

Humans and pets are at risk to contract diseases associated with prairie dog towns, including plague, which can be carried by fleas on prairie dogs, coyotes and squirrels. Don't let pets run loose near prairie dog towns and do not handle prairie dogs, whether alive or dead. If you see a dead prairie dog or one that is acting strangely, contact your local health department or animal control agency for information.



### Prairie dog removal & relocation

Some people find prairie dogs undesirable and wish to remove or kill them to protect their property from holes and burrows, or in order to develop property for other uses.

There are laws and regulations governing both removal and hunting of prairie dogs. Black-tailed prairie dogs are a small game species in Colorado. In order to legally hunt them, you must purchase a small game license from the Division of Wildlife. It is the hunter's responsibility to know whether it is legal to hunt small game, including prairie dogs, in any particular area. Contest hunting of all wildlife species is not permitted. (Division of Wildlife Regulations, Chapter 3.)

Landowners do not need a license to kill prairie dogs causing damage on their property, but they must obey local laws and ordinances. Some private pest control companies



specialize in prairie dog removal.

Control of prairie dogs on private land is governed by the Division of Wildlife/Department of Natural Resources and the Colorado Department of Agriculture.

Information on laws, regulations and directives relating to prairie dog management (including removal, poisoning and relocation) is available from the Division of Wildlife.

Advance written permission, including a permit from the Division of Wildlife, is required to live-trap and relocate black-tailed prairie dogs to a different site. Local wildlife managers can provide information on permit applications.

### More information

If you have questions about black-tailed prairie dogs, call Colorado Division of Wildlife Offices:

**Division of Wildlife Headquarters:** (303) 297-1192  
Northeast Regional Service Center: (303) 291-7227  
6060 Broadway, Denver, CO 80216

West Regional Service Center 711 Independent Ave. Grand Junction, CO 81505 (970) 255-6100	Ft. Collins Service Center 317 W. Prospect Rd. Fort Collins, CO 80526 (970) 472-4300
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Montrose Service Center 2300 S. Townsend Ave. Montrose, CO 81401 (970) 249-3431	Southeast Service Center 2126 N. Weber St. Colorado Spgs, CO 80907 (719) 227-5200
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More information is available on the internet at [www.dnr.state.co.us/wildlife/](http://www.dnr.state.co.us/wildlife/)

or visit [www.protectwildlife.org](http://www.protectwildlife.org)

**Northeast Region/Updated:** February 7, 2000