



Fact Sheet #1 Debunking Common Prairie Dog Myths

Few animals engender as much controversy as black-tailed prairie dogs. But negative reactions and even downright hatred of these small mammals are most often fueled by misperceptions. Decades of careful scientific studies tell a different story about the important role these creatures in prairie ecosystems. We have learned that the presence of black-tailed prairie dogs on the shortgrass prairie is crucial to the survival of other prairie species. We have also learned that they have little impact on cattle grazing operations, a major industry in the Southern Plains. Furthermore, black-tailed prairie dogs are very intelligent and have one of the most complex language systems ever studied. Refuting the myths about prairie dogs is an important start to looking at the unique and fascinating prairie dog ecosystem with fresh eyes.

Myth #1: Prairie dogs are overpopulating.

In Reality: Black-tailed prairie dogs are imperiled, with populations at less than 1-2% of their historic numbers.

Black-tailed prairie dogs are highly imperiled. They have been poisoned, shot, and bulldozed throughout their range across the Great Plains. Plague is also a major killer. There are no prairie dog complexes in the Southern Plains currently large enough to sustain the full complement of wildlife species in the prairie dog ecosystem.

Myth #2: Prairie dogs breed like crazy.

In Reality: Prairie dogs have a very low rate of reproduction.

Prairie dogs breed at a very low rate compared to other small mammals. They reproduce only once per year, and the average litter size is 3-4 pups. Most prairie dog pups do not survive their first year. When confronted with physical barriers to expansion, prairie dogs practice population control, sometimes through infanticide.

Myth #3: Prairie dogs spread the plague.

In Reality: Prairie dogs cannot spread the plague, as they have no immunity to it.

Prairie dogs are too busy dying from the plague to act as carriers and spread the disease. Prairie dogs lack immunity to plague, and mortality rates from outbreaks can exceed 99% of prairie dog populations. Prairie dogs typically die within a few days after contact with the plague bacterium. Other mammals, such as cats and dogs, do carry the plague. Plague

in humans is easily treatable with standard antibiotics. While humans should take the health threat posed by plague seriously, the chances of catching it from a prairie dog are much less than the danger of being struck by lightning. In fact, some of the cases of direct transmission of plague from prairie dogs to humans involved people killing and skinning the animals.

Myth #4: Prairie dogs are an economic threat to livestock production

In Reality: Prairie dogs can be quite compatible with cattle production. See Fact Sheet #4.

Myth #5: No one will miss prairie dogs when they're gone.

In Reality: Wildlife and humans alike are harmed when prairie dog colonies are destroyed.

Given the keystone role prairie dogs play, a variety of wildlife suffers when prairie dog populations decline, some to the point of near-extinction, such as the black-footed ferret. See Fact Sheet #2. People are also affected. In states across the black-tailed prairie dog's range, including every state in the Southern Plains (Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas), local residents have rallied to defend this underdog. Concerned citizens are rising up to protect individual colonies slated for poisoning, developing or shooting contests and pushing their local governments to adopt policies meant to protect prairie dogs and their habitat. These actions seem to be a part of a growing desire of Colorado citizens to protect state wildlife, critical wildlife habitat open space in general.

Key Scientific Sources on Prairie Dogs

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Black-tailed prairie dog on SPLT preserve © Jess Alford.