

FACT SHEET #1

Debunking Common Prairie Dog Myths

Few animals engender as much controversy as black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*). 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 plains of Colorado. Furthermore, black-tailed prairie dogs are very intelligent and have one of the most complex animal 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 of prairie dogs (see Myth #3). There are few prairie dog complexes in the plains of Colorado currently large enough to sustain the full complement of wildlife species in the prairie dog ecosystem, but with dedicated protectors and stewards that could change.

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. Entire colonies can be decimated within 72 hours as 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.



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ALL OUR STORIES TOPICS FIND A SHOW

New research shows prairie dogs may be more friend than foe to Texas ranchers

The burrowing rodents can improve the nutritional quality of nearby grasses.

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July 5, 2022



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

In Reality: New studies are showing a positive benefit between prairie dogs and cattle production. See Fact Sheet #4.

Myth #5: My cattle / horses will break their legs in prairie dog holes

In Reality: There is no evidence that this occurs within typical rangeland and pastures. Among the threats posed by the species, many ranchers claim, is that cows and horses break their legs in prairie dog holes. But that's nonsense, says researcher Larry Rittenhouse of Colorado State University. "It would be almost impossible for a cow to break its leg on a prairie dog hole," he says. "I study these animals' behavior, and they are extremely adept at placing their feet. In my 50 years around cattle and horses, I don't personally know of a single incident where a horse or a cow has been injured in a prairie dog hole."

Myth #6: 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 Plains (Montana, Wyoming, Dakotas, 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

Hoogland, J. L. 2006. Ed. Conservation of the Blacktailed Prairie Dog: Saving North America's Western Grasslands. Washington, DC, Island Press.

Kotliar, Natasha B., Glenn Plumb. 1999. "A critical review of assumptions about the prairie dog as a keystone species." Environmental Management 24(2): 177-192.

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<https://gf.nd.gov/wildlife/id/rodents/prairie-dog>

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/prairie-dogs.htm>

Are you passionate about preserving our natural heritage? Discover how you can help protect prairie dogs from disappearing from our plains. There are numerous resources available for landowners with prairie dogs on their property, and many dedicated groups are working tirelessly to save this keystone species. Reach out today to learn more and become a part of this important conservation effort!



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