

# FIELDNOTES

## Gunnison's Prairie Dog

**DESCRIPTION:** Smaller than the state's other prairie dog species (the black-tailed), the Gunnison's prairie dog (*Cynomys gunnisoni*) ranges from under 1 pound to 3 pounds. These stout-bodied rodents can grow to between 11 and 16 inches. Their coat is yellow-brown and grizzled with black hairs. Dark, diffuse markings lightly accent the areas above and below their eyes. The tail of the Gunnison's prairie dog is relatively short and bears a grayish-white tip. This species uses various warning "barks" to point out different predators such as coyotes, raptors and even humans to other colony members.

**DISTRIBUTION:** These little mammals can be encountered along the Colorado Plateau in high deserts and mountain grasslands between 5,000 and 12,000 feet in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah. They inhabit short- and mid-grass prairies, grass-shrub habitats in low valleys, and subalpine meadows. Although abundant in some areas, all North American prairie dogs have greatly decreased in distribution in the past century. Due to habitat conversion and deadly encounters with disease and poisoning campaigns, they are now estimated to occupy just 2 percent of their historical range.

**HABITAT:** Gunnison's prairie dogs are highly social and construct complex burrow systems within colonies that can expand to more than 11,000 acres. This digging activity is extremely beneficial for the ecosystem. It enhances soil structure and water filtration and provides habitat for other wildlife, including the endangered black-footed ferret. To create such intricate underground communities, prairie dogs prefer well drained, deep soils with minimal rocky obstructions.

Colonies are generally built on flat or slightly sloping land to maximize the prairie dogs' ability to detect approaching predators. These little sentries also improve their field of view by clipping the vegetation in their colonies. This clipping is yet another example of the species' contribution to the environment. It reduces encroachment of woody vegetation and maintains natural grasslands, creates firebreaks, improves plant biodiversity and returns valuable nitrogen to the soil.



ILLUSTRATION BY  
ZACKERY ZDINAK

**BIOLOGY:** This species mates between mid-March and mid-May. Females are sexually receptive for only one day each year. The gestation period lasts 29–30 days and ends with the birth of four or five pups. After about four weeks of nursing underground, the young emerge into a world of early independence. Shortly after emergence, the mother leaves and establishes herself in another burrow. Depending on elevation, these prairie dogs start hibernation between mid-September and November and surface again in February to late April.

**STATUS:** The Gunnison's prairie dog is considered a "species of greatest conservation need" in Arizona. Although factors such as urbanization and agriculture play a role in whether its population can grow, the primary limiting factor appears to be disease. Plague transmitted by fleas can kill individuals within days of exposure, and entire colonies within weeks.

**MANAGEMENT NEEDS:** Due to range-wide population decline, sensitivity to disease, and human pressures, Gunnison's prairie dogs require sustained management. Continuous population monitoring and protection against plague outbreaks will be a vital component in the persistence of this ecologically valuable creature. —Kurt Licence