

Black-tailed Prairie Dog

DESCRIPTION: Black-tailed prairie dogs are very similar to the other four species of prairie dog in North America. These small rodents are 14–17 inches long, weigh 1–3 pounds and have very small ears and paws but long claws for digging. They have brown or tan fur, with lighter underparts.

The black tip at the end of its tail is what sets this prairie dog apart from other species. The tail is 2–3 inches long, about an inch longer than that of other prairie dog species. Black-tails also are unique among prairie dogs because they don't truly hibernate.

Black-tailed prairie dogs are colony-dwelling members of the squirrel family and often are confused with the smaller ground squirrel. They are active during the day and burrow underground. They also rely on distinct vocalizations to warn others in the colony of threats such as coyotes, raptors and badgers.

DISTRIBUTION: These are the most widespread of all prairie dogs. Their range extends from southern Canada to northern Mexico through the western and central Great Plains, southern and eastern New Mexico and southeastern Arizona.

Although they are widely distributed, their habitat is quickly disappearing and becoming fragmented due to development and agriculture. They occupy less than 2 percent of the area they occupied a century ago.

HABITAT: Black-tailed prairie dogs inhabit the grasslands of North America. They prefer alluvial or sandy, loamy soils for their burrows. They eat grasses, forbs, roots, seeds and insects.

Prairie dogs prefer to live in areas where grasses are short, which give them a wide view and allow them to watch for predators. Their grass-clipping and digging activities cycle nutrients back into the soil, increasing the nutritional content of the forage.

Prairie dog burrows extend up to 10 feet below ground and provide protection from predators and weather and nesting places for young. Their deep burrows allow water to be absorbed back into the water table. Many other animals also use prairie dog burrows as their homes, including burrowing owls, reptiles, insects and the endangered black-footed ferret.

BIOLOGY: Black-tailed prairie dogs reproduce once a year in the spring and have three to five pups. Pups remain below ground for up to six weeks after birth. Females remain with their family for life, but males disperse at age 2.

Prairie dogs live in family groups called “coterie.” A coterie generally consists of one male, two to four adult females and all of their pups. Both males and females are territorial, chasing and fighting any intruders. Within a coterie, individuals interact with each other by playing, grooming and “kissing.”

STATUS: The black-tailed prairie dog was a candidate to be listed as endangered in 2000, but was removed in 2009 because colony sizes had increased. Reintroduction of black-tailed prairie dogs began in Arizona in 2008 after they were eliminated from the state by 1960.

SPOTLIGHT ON HERITAGE FUNDING: The Heritage Fund has been instrumental to reestablishing black-tailed prairie dogs in Arizona. Heritage dollars have contributed directly toward relocation efforts and been used as match for other grant programs, bringing in more funding to expand the project and increase the likelihood of success. The future of the black-tailed prairie dog reestablishment project is highly dependent upon funding sources such as this.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Urbanization and agriculture are detrimental to the existence and expansion of prairie dog colonies. Plague also has spread across the West, killing prairie dogs within days of exposure. Management is a key factor for reestablishing this species in Arizona and continuing the growth of colonies and populations across its range. 🦘

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ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZIMNIK

HERITAGE SPOTLIGHT