

# The Blacktailed Prairie Dog in Canada

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As a result of complaints from ranchers of the Val Marie area that prairie dogs were ruining their range, and because there had been recommendations from nature lovers, as well as resolutions from the Natural History Society that prairie dogs should be given the status of a protected species in Canada, I made a field trip on August 12 and 13, 1961, to investigate thoroughly their present status and the attitude of ranchers and other residents towards the prairie dogs.

I found plenty of prairie dogs. The ranchers are greatly concerned about their spreading and establishing new colonies, and they maintain that the prairie dogs consume much pasture suitable for livestock. Only one farmer-rancher with prairie dogs on his land — Mr. Purask, south of Val Marie—was unconcerned about the abundance of these animals. Others, not affected—such as the townspeople—were interested in keeping some around for observation, and also, in my opinion, for the opportunity of clinking them with .22 rifles.

The Blacktailed Prairie Dog is common to the dry prairie region of the Midwest States from Texas to Montana with a few extending into Canada in the Val Marie area of Saskatchewan. When man came into this area, he killed off the buffalo which competed with the prairie dog for range and he killed off the enemies (badger, coyote, fox, owls and snakes) of the prairie dog so that they were able to multiply and spread until by 1900 it was established that in Texas alone one continuous colony covered some 90,000 square miles, with 25,000 additional square miles scattered throughout the state, accommodating some 800,000,000 dogs. At this time it was estimated that the population in the Midwest States amounted to some five billion. On a cattle ranch in Logan County, Kansas, the prairie dog spread so rapidly that in ten years the carrying capacity of the range was reduced from one thousand to five hundred head of cattle. About the year 1900, the United States biological survey started a control program, using poisonous gas and deadly

dopes which has since resulted in the species being reduced and contained in scattered colonies, some of which are protected for the interest of naturalists and tourists.

Prairie dogs clean off practically every bit of vegetation within a considerable radius of their burrows. In Texas it is reported that the average number of burrows in a colony was 25 per acre and that this resulted in pretty well a clean sweep of all vegetation. It would appear that this is accomplished, first, by using the grass and more palatable vegetation for food and then denuding the area of other cover for protection against prowling predators. This was certainly true in the areas I inspected; it appeared there was nothing left in the inhabited area except the roots of various plants which afforded the prairie dog some food.

During my survey, August 12 and 13, I inspected dog colonies on the ranches of W. C. Larson, C. Belza, H. L. Dixon, J. Perrault, E. Purask and the provincial community pasture of Dixon—about eight colonies covering portions of some 18 sections to a greater or lesser extent. Through the courtesy of Mr. Larson, colonies on his ranch and those on the Dixon ranch were located. Mr. F. Perrault showed me the colony on the range of his father, J. Perrault, and Mr. Purask. These locations are as follows: one colony on NE $\frac{1}{4}$  23, NW $\frac{1}{4}$  24, E $\frac{1}{2}$  26, W $\frac{1}{2}$  25 of 2-13-W3, 31 and 36 of 2-12-W3 and 6 of 3-12-W3; one colony, 27-1-11-W3; one colony, NE $\frac{1}{2}$  7-2-11-W3; one colony, 10 and 13 of 2-11-W3; one colony, NW $\frac{1}{4}$  15, SE $\frac{1}{4}$  22 and SW $\frac{1}{4}$  23-2-11-W3; and one colony, NW $\frac{1}{4}$  6 and NW $\frac{1}{4}$  7 of 3-10-W3. A colony was formerly located on SE $\frac{1}{4}$ -35-2-12-W3 but it had been abandoned or destroyed.

I did not go into the history of prairie dogs in the area in too much detail but it would appear that the original dog town was on W $\frac{1}{2}$ -25-2-11-W3 which was purchased by Mr. Perrault in the early 1930s. He used every method he knew to destroy them—gas, poison, flooding, etc.—without much success. He then cultivated the land for several years. An

aerial photo taken in 1938 shows this. It seems the land was not too productive so he sowed it to crested wheat grass. The cultivation resulted in the dogs leaving this land and spreading to surrounding areas suitable to them. Over the years additional colonies were established. It was noted they are now beginning to return to the area formerly cultivated.

I estimate that there are approximately 2,400 acres taken up by the prairie dogs at the present time with an approximate population of 45,000 animals. The locations have been plotted on an aerial map which is filed in my office. These comprise about eight main colonies; however, there are several smaller ones which are not shown. Possibly due to the very dry season there was no vegetation to speak of on any of these more heavily populated areas except scattered sage brush and grease wood. There is evidence that they are eating grease wood, and cactus, too, although these are not normally palatable to them. The range they choose to inhabit is generally the most useless from an agricultural standpoint; at best I doubt if it would carry more than two head of cattle per quarter section.

The Department of Agriculture has, in the case of Mr. Larson, recognized the fact that considerable areas of the land leased to him are of little grazing value and have designated it as wild lands, charging no fee for some 70 acres of the S $\frac{1}{2}$  of 31 and 70 acres on the SE $\frac{1}{4}$  of 30, both in the 2-12-W3, as well as 580 acres or more of 6-3-12-W3. I would recommend that this policy be continued and extended to other ranchers affected if it has not already been done. Mr. Larson's comment on this recommendation was to the effect that he wanted to raise cattle and not prairie dogs.

Many of the dog towns are very difficult to reach. In my opinion, however, the most accessible one lies within the Dixon Community Pasture which is a Game Preserve. This colony covers a large portion of NW $\frac{1}{4}$  of 6 and W $\frac{1}{2}$  of 7-3-10-W3. This is a strong colony, well populated; being in a Game Preserve, it is illegal for anyone to molest it. We have an agreement with the Department of Agriculture to the effect that this location will remain protected. The pasture manager, Mr. E. Hanson,

whose address is Reliance, said that people come to see the dogs from time to time and have been no trouble to him. Signs could be placed at the west gate on the main road directly east of Val Marie and on the southeast corner where a trail comes down from Mankota which would direct the interested public to the location. Of course they could be placed along the main roads leading into the area at desirable locations.

Since the ranchers are concerned about the other colonies spreading and there is definite evidence that this is the case, I would not recommend that steps be taken to make this a protected species. Even though they attempt to control them in the lands under their jurisdiction, I doubt very much if they will ever exterminate them.

At this time I **would not** recommend that the government agencies undertake an extermination program as has been done in the United States.

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## REQUEST FOR OPINIONS

During our June meeting several members who had been in the Val Marie area in May, 1962, vividly described the death of prairie dogs during the current poisoning campaign. Considerable discussion followed but it was finally agreed to postpone our discussion to the annual meeting and that in the meantime we would request the Wildlife Branch for information on the status of the prairie dog in Saskatchewan. Mr. Paynter has kindly allowed us to use this informative report which he had prepared in August, 1961. He says (letter June 22, 1962) that the poisoning campaign carried out this spring by the ranchers "has been far from successful in eradicating the prairie dog." He suggests that the Natural History Society could create considerable public interest if it would erect the signs mentioned in the report.

Please, no matter where you live, consider the prairie dog problem and let us know what you think before our October meeting. Please plan to attend the meeting, to take part in this discussion and other affairs of the society, and to see the University.