

On the Ranch with Prairie Dogs

STORY BY KRISTINE NEMEC



Ron Marquart

Biologists say the rodent is a keystone species; most ranchers say it's a pest. When Kristine Nemec visited ranchers in the Panhandle, she heard two very different perspectives on Nebraska's most controversial animal.

AS I STOOD IN PASTURE 44, I scanned the mocha-colored mounds of dirt for movement. Like many city dwellers, I had seen black-tailed prairie dogs only at zoos or wildlife refuges, where I was amused by their playful behavior. I was in the Panhandle on a cloudless, warm summer day to see prairie dogs in the environment where many Nebraskans find them less entertaining – the cow pasture. But I saw no black-tailed prairie dogs sitting on their haunches or scurrying through the grass. Perhaps they retreated into their underground network of burrows after hearing the pickup trucks.

A prairie dog town is composed of many neighborhoods and family groups. The burrows allow prairie dogs to hide from predators and rear their offspring.

Early pioneers often wrote lively descriptions about prairie dogs' social nature in their journals. In the 1830s, pioneer Josiah Gregg noted that they are "a wild, frolicsome, madcap set of fellows when undisturbed, uneasy and ever on the move, and

appear to take especial delight in chattering away the time."

WHEN A PRAIRIE DOG spots a predator, it barks to alert other colony members. Although the prairie dogs' barking sounds led French explorers to dub them "little dog," they are rodents that belong to the squirrel family. And like many rodents, prairie dogs are considered pests by a lot of ranchers.

Two such ranchers, Emil Raben and Leonard Forbes, joined me in the pasture. Emil had also asked Jenny Nixon, an extension educator with the University of Nebraska extension office in Crawford, to come along. Jenny has a master's degree in rangelands science and can assess the impacts of prairie dogs on a pasture.

Pasture 44 is not on a private ranch, but lies within Oglala National Grassland, over 94,000 acres of shortgrass prairie managed by the U.S. Forest Service. By law, the Forest Service manages the land for a variety of uses, including grazing, hunting, recreation and wildlife. Most of the land at

Oglala is available for grazing under a rotation grazing system. Leonard is a member of the Sugarloaf Grazing Association, which leases the majority of the grazing land at Oglala from the government and subleases it to 34 ranchers. He planned to graze 120 cows on the pasture during the summer.

“This pasture’s not fully infested,” he said, referring to prairie dogs with about as much warmth as a homeowner feels for termites. But if the prairie dog town gets bigger he’s afraid the cows will not have much grass to eat.

Ranchers and researchers agree that prairie dogs and livestock feed on many of the same plants. However, studies on the degree to which prairie dogs affect livestock production have been inconsistent. The impacts are difficult to measure and depend on site conditions, weather and the size, population and age of prairie dog towns. Some research shows that the reduced amount of grass may be partially compensated by the improved nutrition of newly-growing grasses and other plants that are found on prairie dog colonies. Jenny doesn’t think the nutritious grass makes much of a difference though – prairie dogs still eat a lot of grass that cows could be eating.

Jenny knelt and glided her hand over the short blades of grass, stopping every so often to pluck a blade of grass and inspect it. She was disappointed to find a lot of a grass called prairie three-awn. It has a tufted head with a few little barbs.

Jenny explained that, just as people tend to prefer softer foods like bananas over crunchier foods like celery, both cat-



Leonard Forbes, who lives near Crawford and is a member of the Sugarloaf Grazing Association, is taking action against prairie dogs that compete with his cattle for grass.

tle and prairie dogs prefer to eat the softer western wheatgrass to prairie three-awn. Other grasses favored by cattle, sedge black root and blue grama, are absent from the pasture. Overall, she rated this pasture as poor in quality.

Our next stop was Pasture 45. There was hardly any grass in sight. The pasture had much more cactus than Pasture 44, and a lot of a tan scrubby plants called broom snakeweed. The ground was bare and cracked.

Ray Semroska joined our group. His ranch covers 3,000 acres of land adjacent to Oglala, and he has prairie dogs on about 90 percent of his property. Like Emil and Leonard, he is not pleased with the Forest Service’s management of prairie dogs.

“Prairie dogs have always been out here, but have never been out here like this,” Emil said. “There are so many bare spots. The federal government and radicals have killed all the grass by letting them get out of control.” The ranchers don’t believe all of the prairie dogs at Oglala should be eliminated. They just want the Forest Service to keep the towns smaller.

Emil said the best way to control prairie dogs is to poison a colony on a regular basis. The most commonly used poison for prairie dogs is zinc phosphide, a rodent poison that is mixed with oats. Some ranchers, like Ray, fumi-

gate prairie dog burrows with a poisonous gas. Ray said he spends two hours every day poisoning prairie dogs on his land. He’s had people come out to shoot prairie dogs on his property, but hunting doesn’t affect the population much.

Although prairie dog hunting is allowed at Oglala, the Forest Service doesn’t use it as a management strategy. Like Ray, they poison them, a practice they resumed after a brief moratorium several years ago. In 1998, the National Wildlife Federation, Biodiversity Legal Foundation and the Keystone Conservation petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to list the black-tailed prairie dog as threatened throughout its range. The groups were concerned that the black-tailed prairie dog occupies less than one percent of its historic range across the Great Plains from southern Canada to northern Mexico. Since European settlement, much of the prairie dogs’ prairie habitat has been converted to cropland. During the 20th century, aggressive poisoning campaigns further reduced the prairie dog population. Many of the remaining prairie dog colonies are small and susceptible to being wiped out by plague.

In response, the Forest Service agreed to halt the poisoning of prairie dogs on federal lands. But the Forest Service lifted the moratorium in 2004 when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reviewed prairie dog population data and decided that prairie dog numbers were high enough they did not need to be listed as threatened. The Forest Service then decided to poison about half of Oglala’s 2,200 acres of prairie dogs late in 2005.



Bernie Auten

Prairie dogs are social rodents. Their chatty antics above ground provide a glimpse of life below – in the network of burrows separately defined as nurseries, sleeping quarters and toilets, but collectively referred to as a prairie dog town.

Don Bright, former supervisor of the Nebraska National Forest unit that includes Oglala, said prairie dog colonies had expanded during the drought years between 1999 and 2004 as the animals searched for scarce vegetation. Some colonies encroached onto private rangeland adjacent to Oglala, leading to complaints from ranchers. Don explained that poisoning would be used in conjunction with livestock grazing strategies and encouraging the growth of tall vegetation that discourages prairie dogs from spreading.

"We won't know how effective the poisoning was until late this summer," Don said. Poisoning rarely kills 100 percent of the prairie dogs in a colony. The few individuals that remain can reproduce and repopulate the town within two to three years if they are not poisoned again. Meanwhile, the Forest Service hopes the drought will ease so the prairie dogs will stay put within Oglala's boundaries.

DURING MY VISIT to the Panhandle, I was hard pressed to find anyone who did not view prairie dogs as a pest. But I had learned about one rancher who believes



Steve and Bobbi Olson (both)

prairie dogs and cattle can live harmoniously. After leaving Oglala I headed to Jean Parker's Cross L Ranch east of Gordon.

As I walked up to Jean Parker's small green ranch house, I was greeted by a beagle. A shaggy black mutt and a basset hound mix soon showed up. Jean introduced me to the pack and explained that these are only a few of her dogs. She takes in unwanted dogs until she can find homes

for them, at times sheltering up to 20 dogs in the remodeled chicken coops behind the house. We hopped into her Jeep, which had an earthy smell from the dog food scattered on the floor.

Jean talked about her background as she drove toward the prairie dog town on the ranch. She is a fifth-generation Nebraska rancher who long thought of prairie dogs as pests. When she and her late husband, Howard, acquired her in-laws' ranch, she asked, "When are we going to get rid of those prairie dogs?"

But Howard was a strong advocate for the prairie dogs. His family had always believed in working with nature. He wasn't about to poison the town.

Jean came to appreciate the prairie dogs the more she talked to Howard and to "Buffalo" Bruce McIntosh, an environmental activist from Chadron. Bruce told her that nearly 200 wildlife species live in and around prairie dog towns. Scientists consider the prairie dog to be a keystone species, a species whose presence is central to the survival of other wildlife. The open patches of habitat and tunnels created by prairie dogs have a different variety of plants and animals than the surrounding

SANDSTONE GRILL

Home of Amazing Food at Great Prices



Owners: Tenise Jarecke & Tammy Schmaljohn

Make your trip to Burwell complete with lunch and dinner at the Sandstone Grill. Featuring fresh salads and homemade soups, inventive sandwiches and burgers, grilled steak, pork chops, shrimp and chicken. Save room for homemade dessert. Full wine, liquor and beer selection. Catering and party room available for special events. Experience the food. Explore the history.

Mon-Thu, 10:30 a.m.-9 p.m. • Fri-Sat, 10:30 a.m.-10 p.m.

Sunday Brunch – first Sunday of each month

www.sandstonegrill.com

416 Grand Ave. • Burwell, NE • 308-346-4582



Satisfy your craving

Whether you're in the area for recreation at Calamus, in town for the big rodeo or live nearby, the Pizza Palace can satisfy your cravings for pizza, pasta or Bosco stix. Stop in and dine, or carry out.

Summer hours: Memorial Day to Labor Day,
7 days a week from 10 am to 9 pm.
Buffet served daily 11:30 am to 2:00 pm

 **Pizza Palace**

308-346-5200 • www.pizzapalaceburwell.com
204 Grand Avenue Burwell, NE



Ranchers, like Forbes, and his wife Linda, believe better control of the prairie dog population is needed at the Oglala grasslands pastures. Jean Parker, opposite page, of Gordon is a fifth-generation Nebraska rancher who has learned to appreciate prairie dogs as a species that is central to the survival of other wildlife.

grassland habitat. Jean was amazed at the diversity of wildlife that she would see in the town.

We descended into the valley where the prairie dog town lay. On that calm day, the windmill near the town was barely spinning. Several prairie dogs jumped up, then darted into their holes.

A burrowing owl lifted off a mound and glided into the distance.

"We have eight pairs of burrowing owls," Jean said. "And the only ferruginous hawk nest in Sheridan County."

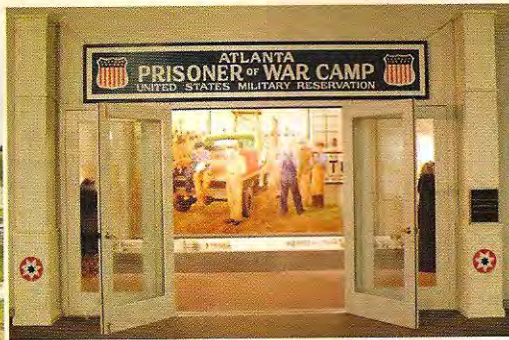
According to Bruce, the birds prefer Jean's prairie dog town because she is the only rancher in the area who doesn't poi-

son her prairie dogs. "Poison is nondiscriminate," he said. "It kills off the other creatures in the town too. Jean's town is the only one that is a truly healthy ecosystem."

Both bird species rely on healthy prairie dog towns for food. They're also among Nebraska's species most at risk for extinction, called Tier 1 species by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Other Tier 1 wildlife species that depend on prairie dog towns include the long-billed curlew, McCown's longspur, mountain plover and swift fox.

One species that is notably absent from Nebraska prairie dog towns is the endangered black-footed ferret. One of the nation's rarest mammals, the ferret feeds almost exclusively on prairie dogs. The ferret has not been seen in Nebraska since the 1960s. While captive-bred ferrets have been reintroduced into the wild in other states, including across the state line in South Dakota, Nebraska does not have a prairie dog complex large enough to support a ferret population. With 99 percent of prairie dog colonies in Nebraska occurring on private land, federal land at Oglala offers one of the best potential ferret reintroduction sites in the state.

Step back in time to the late 1800s



Bring the family and stroll through the turn of the century town square. Visit businesses of the era including the fire hall, complete with a 1922 "American La France" fire engine purchased by the Holdrege Volunteer Fire Department on September 27, 1923. More than 65,000 square feet of interior exhibit space complements Main Street. See the Atlanta WWII POW camp exhibit and photos of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Visit the Nebraska Prairie Museum in Holdrege.

**NEBRASKA
PRAIRIE
MUSEUM**
OF THE PHELPS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Hours:
Mon-Fri • 10 am-4 pm
Sat-Sun • 1-5 pm
Group Rates Available

N. Hwy 183 • Holdrege, NE 68949-0164 • 308-995-5015 • www.nebraskaprairie.org

A Leader in Native Grass and Wildflower Production

Plan now for summer planting.

- CRP Seedings
- Hay & Grazing
- Pasture & Forage
- Field Seed
- Erosion Control
- Lawn Seed
- Lawn Fertilizer
- Wildlife Habitat
- Floodplain Re-establishment
- Acreage Seedings
- Ornamental
- Conservation
- Cool and Warm Season Grass
- Wildflowers
- Waterways
- Landscaping
- Seed Oats
- Cody™ & Bowie™ Turf-type Buffalgrass

STOCK SEED FARMS
AND WILDFLOWER SEED

Visit our website to view our entire product line, request a free catalog, or place an order!

www.stockseed.com

Email us at prairie@stockseed.com

1.800.759.1520 • 28008 Mill Road • Murdock, NE



Don't be fooled. Though prairie dogs barely reach 15 inches on tiptoe and rarely exceed four pounds, they are considered by many ranchers to be among the biggest pests known to Nebraska's grasslands.

Despite its role as a keystone species, the prairie dog has not been given a specific management plan by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Wyoming is the only other state in the 11-member Interstate Black-tailed Prairie Dog Conservation Team which has chosen not to develop a prairie dog plan. Jim Douglas, administrator of the Commission's wildlife division, said the prairie dog is covered under the state's general plan for non-game species, the Nebraska Legacy Project. In 2003 the Commission conducted an aerial survey of the state and estimated Nebraska has 137,000 acres of prairie dogs. Most of the prairie dogs are found in the western two-thirds of the state, excluding the Sandhills. He said the state will begin a concerted, statewide effort to manage prairie dogs and will survey the population again in the future.

Currently the prairie dog is offered some protection under the Nebraska Shortgrass Prairie Partnership. Formed in 2003, the partnership's goal is to conserve and enhance shortgrass prairie habitat on private lands by offering technical assistance and incentives to private landowners. Mike Fritz, a biologist with the Commission, said a couple of conservation easements under the programs have included land with prairie dog towns.

Jean has long practiced conservation on her ranch, but I asked her if there have been any drawbacks. Does she have the concerns that most ranchers have, about cattle breaking their legs in the prairie dog holes or competing with the prairie dogs for grass?

She said she's never had a cow break a leg in a prairie dog hole and has ridden horses through the prairie dog town. When she turns cows out in the pasture, the town is the first place they go to graze.

The prairie dog town has remained at about 30 acres for as long as she's been on the ranch. She thinks the town hasn't expanded because the valley is surrounded by sandy soil, which the prairie dogs don't like.

"If the town ever gets too big, we'll turn some ferrets loose," she says with a laugh. More likely, she and Bruce will try to keep the prairie dogs from spreading to the neighbor's ranch by putting up a snow fence near her property line.

Jean said the prairie dogs are always welcome on her ranch. "We need to protect what we have, and leave something for future generations." 🐾

Nebraska BED & BREAKFASTS Welcome You

Yost Farm Cottage

The cottage is located on the edge of Red Cloud in the heart of Catherland and sits next to our restored one-room country schoolhouse. Enjoy country life just a few blocks from Cather's home and the Red Cloud Opera House.

Call or email today for availability
402-746-2856 • jandayost@yahoo.com
Red Cloud, NE

NEBRASKA'S
GRAND CANYON

Come see what's known as Nebraska's Grand Canyon. Big Canyon Inn along the Niobrara River, 15 minutes north of Bassett is the perfect get away for relaxing, hiking, horseback riding, hunting or wildlife watching. We have camping spots and horse pens available as well as our modern home. Call for availability and more information.

BIG CANYON INN
HC 82 Box 107 • Springview, NE 68778
800-437-6023

AUNT MYRNAS CABIN

Get away from it all at Aunt Myrna's cabin. This little cabin on the prairie is rustic with modern comforts. Native trout fishing in nearby stream, plus trails for hiking and biking, Big horn sheep and spectacular Pine Ridge rock bluffs. Call for brochure and reservations.

308-665-2343
www.aunt-myrnas-cabin.com
1007 Bethel Road
Whitney, NE 69367

The Resting Place
BED & BREAKFAST

Our home is your home while you are our guests.

Rest up for as long as you'd like at our quiet, relaxing, air-conditioned bed and breakfast. Four rooms feature private baths. We are located in residential Gothenburg near an 18-hole golf course. Serving full or continental breakfast. Come rest up at:

The Resting Place
Forrest & Jewel Johnson
1622 Ave. F • Gothenburg, NE 69138
(308) 537-4424 • restplace@atcjet.net

Plantation House

Let us make your stay in northeast Nebraska a memorable one. Our plantation-style mansion features five uniquely decorated guest rooms with private baths. There's also a personal "getaway cottage."

Your innkeepers are
Kyle and Deb Warren.

Reserve your stay:
1-888-446-2287

www.plantation-house.com
401 Plantation St. • Elgin, NE 68636-9301
Member NABB

Relax • Retreat • Renew

Whispering Pines
bed & breakfast

The perfect setting...

- ...a romantic picnic in the garden
- ...a pampering girlfriend's getaway
- ...a private family event celebration

to create your memories!

1878 Victorian Home, 6 acres, 5 rooms with Private Bath, Gourmet Breakfast, Hot Tubs Open year round, Gift Certificates, Specialty Dining, Luncheons, Meetings

(402) 873-5850 • Nebraska City, NE
www.bbwhisperingpines.com
Member NABB