

## PRAIRIE DOG TOWN

There are five types of prairie dogs, the Gunnison's, Mexican, Utah, white-tailed and black tailed with the black-tailed occupying the greatest territory throughout the west. The black-tails original range in the Great Plains stretched from southern Canada to northern Mexico and their population was in the uncountable millions. One early black-tailed "town" in Texas was reported to cover 25,000 square miles and house 400 million prairie dogs. The prairie dogs once occupied over a million acres of southeastern Arizona. Their range included portions of Cochise, Graham, Pima and Santa Cruz counties. Over the last 150 years though, the black-tails range had been reduced to less than 2% of what it had been and they had been completely exterminated in Arizona by the 1960s. A population study conducted in 2004 estimated that only 1,842,000 acres of black-tailed prairie dog habitat remained in the entire United States.

There are many reasons for the huge reduction in the population of the prairie dogs but the two most significant were the fragmentation and loss of habitat as the Great Plains were settled and the extermination efforts by ranchers and the Federal Government to remove them from rangeland. They were considered to be pests and in direct competition with cattle for food since their diet consisted primarily of grasses and forbs (.herbs other than grasses). Subsequent studies though have shown that the prairie dog has a significant impact on the health of the prairie. They are now considered to be a keystone species, one that has a large overall effect on the ecosystem structure and function. An attempt was made in 1998 and again in 2007 to have the black-tailed prairie dog listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act but it was determined in 2009 that this action was not warranted.

In the 1970s, the Arizona Game and Fish Department started investigating the possibility of reintroducing the black-tailed prairie dog to Arizona. In the late 1990s a multistate Prairie Dog Conservation Team was formed. This resulted in the creation of the Arizona Black-Tailed Prairie Dog Working Group with the task of developing a management plan for Arizona. One of the results of this effort was the establishment of a black-tailed prairie dog town in the Las Cienegas Conservation Area of the historic Empire Ranch north of Sonoita Arizona. Seventy-four of the prairie dogs were trapped in New Mexico in 2008 and released in the new "dog town". An additional release was made in 2009 at this site and at another site being established in another location in the conservation area. As of 2016, six more sites have been selected within Las Cienegas for the future establishment of black-tailed prairie dog towns. The Arizona Game and Fish Department, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the Bureau of Land Management, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum and the Phoenix Zoo are partnering in the reintroduction of the black-tailed prairie dog.

Figure 1 shows the site of the first prairie dog town that was established in the Las Cienegas Conservation Area. The tall grass in the foreground of the picture serves as a buffer between a

road and the short grass area where the prairie dogs reside. Figure 2 shows two of the residents of the “town”.



Figure 1. Prairie Dog Town



Figure 2. Black-Tailed Prairie Dogs

Some interesting facts concerning the black-tailed prairie dog:

- They are diurnal (active during the day) all year long. They do not hibernate.
- Adult prairie dogs weigh from 1 ½ to 3 pounds and are from 14 to 17 inches long including the tail. Lifespan is estimated at 5 years for males and 7 years for females.
- They are social animals and live in family groups called coteries. A coterie usually consists of a breeding male, three to four breeding females and juveniles less than 2 years old. Male offspring are forced to depart the coterie as soon as they reach breeding age.
- They have an extensive communication system with a different alarm call for different predators.
- They are highly territorial and are hostile to individuals outside their coterie.

Summarized by T. Johnson from the Arizona Game and Fish Department website and the Wikipedia website. Photos by T. Johnson