

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Bureau of Biological Survey

DIVISION OF INFORMATION

FOR RELEASE FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 1939

Prairie Dogs Vegetarians,
Compete for Range, Study Shows

Why it is that prairie dogs are competitors of livestock on the grazing ranges was disclosed today in a report from the Bureau of Biological Survey to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. The report showed the animals, chubby rodents that live in large colonies on the western plains, to be something of a conservation enemy.

In a study of the food habits of the prairie dog which involved stomach examination of more than 500 of three species of the animal, it was found that they are almost complete vegetarians. Plants of forage and crop value constitute 78 per cent of their food.

Economically the prairie dogs' habits are of importance because the animals are direct competitors of sheep and cattle for forage on western range lands, the report explained. More than 97 per cent of the prairie dogs' food is vegetation, it is pointed out, with roots, stems, and leaves being the favored plant-parts eaten. Only 19 per cent of the bulk consumed is vegetation which is unimportant as livestock food.

Predominating in the prairie dogs' diet are grasses and saltbushes, which form 45 per cent and 25 per cent, respectively, of the total quantity of foods eaten. Of the grasses, wheatgrass and fescue are most popular, while saltbush and Russian thistle head the list of the goosefoot (saltbush) plants eaten.

Of the many other plant families consumed by prairie dogs, none had a high yearly percentage. Most of these plants not only are of little forage or crop value but are troublesome weeds. They include the nightshades and locoweeds, which are poisonous to cattle.

The small quantity of animal matter (2.53 per cent) eaten by the three species of prairie dogs examined consisted mostly of cutworms and grasshoppers.

The Biological Survey report is based on examination of the stomach contents of three of the five North American species of prairie dogs--the whitetail, the blacktail, and the Gunnison. No stomach material was available for the Utah prairie dog, which is restricted to the mountain valleys of central Utah, or for the Mexican species, which is found only in a small part of that country.

As a group, prairie dogs are recognized as thick, fat-bodied rodents about 10 inches long. They have short legs and tails and inconspicuous ears. These rodents are gregarious animals and live in large colonies popularly called towns.

Most individuals of the five species of prairie dogs are concentrated in the Plains States, and the species range from the Canadian border to Mexico, including the greater part of Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.

To prevent the prairie dogs from destroying large areas of crop and forage lands, control measures often must be adopted. At the request of private organizations, or County, State, or other Federal officials, the Survey's Division of Predator and Rodent Control last year treated 2,139,000 acres of cultivated and range lands infested with prairie dogs.

The report, written by Leon H. Kelso, then in the Biological Survey's Section of Food Habits, Division of Wildlife Research, is available to the public as a printed Circular entitled, "Food Habits of Prairie Dogs."