

STATUS OF THE BLACK AND WHITE-TAILED PRAIRIE DOGS IN MONTANA^{TWS}

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An inventory of black and white-tailed prairie dogs in Montana was made during a 2-year period from 1996 through 1998. The inventory consisted of visiting previously recorded prairie dog colony sites, and mapping the colonies using satellite based mapping technology. We attempted to visit 1,004 prairie dog colony sites but obtained access to only 864 colonies. Of the 864 colony sites visited, 27 percent were not found at their previously designated location. Another 16 percent appeared to have previously been at the designated location but were abandoned for a variety of reasons. These reasons included suspected plague, poisoning and land conversion to agriculture. During the survey, 459 active prairie dog colonies were found, and 24,251 acres of prairie dog occupied landscape were mapped. Seventy-one percent of the prairie dog colonies were classified as containing either a high or medium prairie dog density, and 72 percent were classified as either increasing or stable. Approximately 50 percent of the prairie dog colonies were located in rolling prairies and 42 percent occurred in valley bottoms. The remainder of the colonies were situated on ridge tops. Fifty wildlife species were observed in prairie dog colonies.

Frequently occurring species included the horned lark, meadowlark, kill deer, mountain plover, burrowing owl, badger, pronghorn, and coyote. Data from this survey were combined with other survey information collected by the Bureau of Land Management in the Phillips, Judith, and Big Dry Resource Areas. The Bureau of Indian Affairs provided recent mapping data for the Fort Belknap, Northern Cheyenne, and Crow Reservations. The combined Montana data resulted in a minimum estimate of 1,353 active prairie dog colonies totaling 66,420 acres. This is approximately half of the prairie dog acreage estimated for Montana during the late 1980's. The cause of the decline is probably due to the spread of sylvatic plague. Prairie dogs occupied 1 percent or more of the landscape in only 3 quarter latilongs. The majority of the quarter latilongs with 1 or more prairie dog colonies contained less than 0.05 percent of the landscape occupied by prairie dogs. Only 2 white tailed prairie dog colonies remain in Montana and they total less than 100 acres. The black-tailed prairie dog in Montana is not threatened with extinction, but the risk of white-tailed prairie dogs being extirpated from the State during the next century is high.