

# Gunnison's Prairie Dog



*Cynomys gunnisoni*

## Identification

Gunnison's prairie dogs are stout, burrowing rodents in the squirrel family, found only in four U.S. states (Colorado, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico). Adults are 12-15 in/30-38 cm long and weigh 1.4-2.6 lbs/0.6-1.1 kg. Their coat is yellowish buff with some interspersed black hairs, and the tops of their heads, cheeks, and eyebrows are a darker color. They have short tails with grayish-white tips. Gunnison's prairie dogs are estimated to currently occupy 5% of their historic range.



Photo credit: [J.N. Stuart](#)

## Observation Tips

Gunnison's prairie dogs are daytime burrowers and can be seen near burrow entrances. Unlike the black-tailed prairie dog, they hibernate during winter, which may last from October to March. In spring and summer, they are most active in early mornings and late afternoons. With 50-100 individuals in a colony of less than 10 acres, Gunnison's prairie dog colonies are much smaller and more dense than other species of prairie dog, which can average 1.4-12 individuals per acre across thousands of acres.

## Interesting Fact

Gunnison's prairie dogs are found in both montane and prairie habitats, yet mountain ranges separate portions of their range, preventing individuals from moving between montane and prairie habitats.

## Ideal Habitat

Gunnison's prairie dog inhabits foothill prairies, high mountain valleys and plateaus (6,000 – 12,000 ft/1,830 - 3,660 m in elevation) in Colorado, Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. Colonies are found in temperate grasslands and deserts, occupying open areas or shrublands with scattered juniper and pine trees. Burrows are typically found on <15% slopes and areas with <25% shrub cover. In higher elevations (montane habitats), Gunnison's prairie dog occupies grassland and shrublands in low valleys and mountain meadows. In lower elevations (prairie habitats), they occupy shortgrass and midgrass prairies. They require loamy sand, sandy loam or loamy soils for creating their burrows.



## Management Activities that Benefit Species – Best Management Practices (BMPs)

Preserve and maintain open native grasslands and montane meadows. Gunnison prairie dog colonies are usually small, less than 10 acres, which can be compatible with large livestock operations. Gunnison's prairie dogs, especially populations in moist, montane areas, are also threatened by sylvatic plague, which can quickly eliminate entire colonies. Unlike other species of prairie dogs, Gunnison's prairie dog populations experience little to no recovery after colony die-offs, likely because colonies are smaller and more isolated from one another. If possible, allow Gunnison's prairie dog colonies to inhabit intact rangelands. Federal incentives for allowing Gunnison's prairie dogs on your land are available. Adaptive land management practices that promote native grasslands and encourage prairie dog predators are recommended for colony control.

## Management Activities to Avoid

Avoid eliminating entire colonies of Gunnison's prairie dogs. Avoid using chemical pesticides to kill prairie dogs. Poisons might accidentally kill other species that prey on prairie dogs, such as the federally endangered black-footed ferret. If prairie dog population control is needed, choose an integrated pest management approach that meets goals without eliminating the entire colony or harming other species.

## Other Species that Benefit from Similar Habitat Management

Gunnison's prairie dogs are considered a keystone species. The federally endangered black-footed ferret depends on prairie dogs for 95% of their diet. Many other species depend on the prairie dogs for food and for their burrows including burrowing owls, ferruginous hawks, red-tailed hawks, bobcats, and coyotes.

## Other Resources

**International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).** 2016. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2020-3.

[Cynomys gunnisoni](#).

**National Park Service.** 2015. Prairie Dogs of the American Southwest. [Article series](#).

**NatureServe.** 2021. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.1. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. [Gunnison's prairie dog](#).

**Seglund, A.E., and P.M. Schnurr.** 2010. [Colorado Gunnison's and white-tailed prairie dog conservation strategy](#). Colorado Division of Wildlife.