

Utah Prairie Dog



Cynomys parvidens

Identification

Utah prairie dogs are 12-14 in/30-36 cm long with coats that range from tawny to reddish-brown, dark spots above the eyes and a short, white-tipped tail. The Utah prairie dog is a federally Threatened species found only in the southwestern part of the state of Utah. Historically, its range included Pine and Buckskin valleys, north to Salina Canyon, south to Bryce Canyon National Park, and east to the foothills of the Aquarius Plateau. Today, its range is estimated to be only 18 square miles/28 square km and shrinking: only 10% of Utah prairie dog habitat is left. Populations now inhabit Bryce Canyon National Park, parts of the Awapa Plateau, Sevier River valleys, and small populations in mountain valleys. All populations occur between elevations of 5,000-9,000 ft/1,500-2,700 m.



Photo credit: [James Marvin Phelps](#)

Observation Tips

Utah prairie dogs are active during the day, though they do spend much of their time in complex underground burrows. A “lookout” can be seen posted at burrow entrances. Population densities range from 1-47 per acre/0.4 to 19 per hectare. Similar to white-tailed prairie dogs, Utah prairie dogs hibernate in winter. They enter hibernation from mid-July to November and emerge from mid-March to April depending on elevation and age.

Interesting Fact

Utah prairie dogs reproduce more slowly than other rodents and have high mortality rates. Although females mate and produce litters in their first year, less than half of males mate in their first year. Females give birth to a single litter each year, averaging 3-5 young. However, fewer than 60% survive their first year and 30% survive their second year.

Ideal Habitat

Ideal Utah prairie dog habitat is flat grasslands within sagebrush communities. Vegetation must be low and sparse for prairie dogs to spot predators. They require deep (>3 ft/1 m), well-drained soil for digging burrows. Both quantity and quality of vegetation is important for Utah prairie dogs: colonies in areas with high plant species diversity and a preference for grasses over shrubs help individual prairie dogs gain enough weight for hibernation and support greater population densities. They avoid areas with dense or tall vegetation, with canopy height >7 in/18 cm. Generally, ideal habitat has >10% perennial grass cover and <20% shrub cover.



Range map provided by International Union for Conservation of Nature

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

Although colonies exist on public land, 75% of Utah prairie dogs are on private lands, where they're at risk of habitat loss and fragmentation from development. When at all possible, allow Utah prairie dogs to inhabit areas of private property. Maintain intact grasslands. Managed livestock grazing can be beneficial to Utah prairie dogs, as it maintains shorter vegetation, encourages grass growth, and can reduce shrub density. Tall, dense shrubs can be used to slow or restrict Utah prairie dog colony expansion into undesired areas. Control populations using an adaptive management approach and take advantage of state or federal incentives for maintaining prairie dogs on private land.

Management Activities to Avoid

Avoid habitat loss to agriculture and residential development, and direct poisoning or shooting of Utah prairie dogs. Like other species of prairie dogs, plague has caused severe population declines. Habitat loss and fragmentation and grassland conversion to sagebrush continues to reduce habitat quantity and quality.

Other Species that Benefit from Similar Habitat Management

Utah prairie dogs are a keystone species, meaning they have a larger influence on their habitat than other species. Many species depend on them and their burrows, including burrowing owls and plovers. Utah prairie dogs are also prey for many species, including hawks, golden eagles, coyotes, badgers, and the federally endangered black-footed ferret.

Other Resources

International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). 2018. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2021-1.

[Utah prairie dog.](#)

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

United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). [Utah prairie dog.](#)

United States National Park Service (NPS). 2015. [Utah prairie dogs in Bryce Canyon National Park.](#)