



Prairie Dog Colony Reestablished at AOK's Niobrara Sanctuary

Article and Photos by **Ron Klataske**

Late this summer and early fall a hundred Black-tailed Prairie Dogs were captured at the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge and relocated to the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary. Although there used to be prairie dogs on the property and in that part of Rock County, they were extirpated a couple decades ago.

The relocation was allowed under a Scientific and Educational Permit issued by the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission. Staff of the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission evaluated the reintroduction site and carefully considered the views of all stakeholders prior to approval. Qualifications for the permit were extensive, and required considerable investment, but ecological restoration of a full complement of prairie wildlife native to this vicinity is an integral part of our management plan.

We are hoping that the experience and information obtained will help to encourage and/or prove useful to other landowners and managers who want to establish new and/or maintain existing prairie dog colonies. In particular, success with fencing may help landowners who want to include it along with other techniques, such as vegetative barriers, to discourage dispersal from existing prairie dog colonies to adjacent areas where they are not wanted. We also know that the new colony will benefit many of the species traditionally associated with prairie dog colonies. These include Burrowing Owls, Ferruginous Hawks, Golden Eagles and Ornate Box Turtles.

Capturing Prairie Dogs

On Saturday July 28 and on September 13, Fish and Wildlife Service staff and family members, and students working at the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge for the summer, volunteered to lead the way in the capture of prairie dogs from the horse pasture behind the headquarters and residential facilities. The population there has been encroaching into that area beyond the level desired for other management purposes.

I had tried in mid July to capture prairie dogs with box traps, however, that approach wasn't successful. In this location, the horses in the pasture discovered and responded to the "sweet



feed" and oats more quickly, and they routinely turned the traps over to spill the bait.

During the previous week, NWR staff had been in the field helping with the major effort to fight the devastating wild fires that had erupted from lightening along the Niobrara River valley. After the fires were under control the refuge's fire engines were available for the prairie dog capture enterprise. With a soapy substance added to the water in the tanks, water was flushed down prairie dog burrows to flood them out. Usually the suds would come up out of one or more additional interconnected burrows, suggesting a direct connection. Other long-established burrows seemed to be bottomless and could conceivably accept hundreds of gallons.

Then our luck changed and a few prairie dogs began emerging from most of the flooded burrows. We grabbed them with our gloved hands as they emerged soaking wet and rushed them over to water coolers with spigots where they were rinsed off. Then they were placed in holding cages kept in the shade since it was another of many days with temperatures above 100 degrees.

At the end of the first afternoon, a fairly long day with a brief break for pizza and ice cream, we loaded them in the stock trailer acquired to be a mobile wildlife viewing blind at the sanctuary and headed 70 miles east to the relocation site designated to be a new prairie dog colony on the Niobrara Sanctuary.

Purposes of a New Colony: Ecological

The idea is to establish the new colony to serve several ecological, scientific and educational purposes. We have prepared a remarkably inviting place for their new home. Although prairie dogs were once common in Rock County, and occurred on the property now owned by Audubon of Kansas, the species has apparently been totally extirpated from the county. A couple small colonies have survived in Keya Paha County a few miles north, across the Niobrara River. Lewis and Clark first encountered prairie dogs about 50 miles northeast of the sanctuary, at a place called Baldy Knob.

Lewis and Clark described their first prairie dog "town" experience near the Nebraska/South Dakota state line, west of the Missouri River and north of the Niobrara River, where they captured their first prairie dog. A live prairie dog was among the specimens sent to President Thomas Jefferson from Fort Mandan in 1805.

From the Expedition Journals, September 7, 1804:

"Discovered a Village of Small animals that burrow in the ground (those animals are Called by the french Petite Chien) Killed one and Caught one alive by poreing a great quantity of Water in his"

As a prairie keystone species that benefits many other wildlife species, the added presence of a prairie dog colony at the sanctuary should soon or eventually provide nesting habitat for Burrowing Owls, and become a part of the prey base for Ferruginous Hawks and Golden Eagles that fly overhead. However, predation will be a factor that we will try to minimize until the colony is well established within the 20-acre enclosure designed for this purpose.

The colony will help to fulfill our goal of making the sanctuary a place that will help to maintain grassland birds and other prairie wildlife native to the area.

Purposes of a New Colony: Education and Wildlife Appreciation

One of the important goals of the Niobrara Sanctuary is to provide unique wildlife viewing opportunities to give visitors an opportunity to gain insight into the behavior of various wildlife species and interaction between species. The observation blind adjacent to the colony site will also be a good place for photography, especially once the colony is established and active. Among other things, prairie dog colonies attract a diversity of birds, including Upland Sandpipers, Western Meadowlarks, Horned Larks, and Sharp-tailed Grouse.

Purposes of a New Colony: Scientific (Evaluating Fencing and Relocation Success)

The project will give us an excellent opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the fence I designed several years ago. We used it in western Kansas to discourage dispersal, but this will be an opportunity to observe its effectiveness as a complete enclosure. In this case we can evaluate its effectiveness at keeping translocated prairie dogs on the site (within the fenced enclosure), and hopefully



discouraging some badgers from invading the site and potentially decimating the new inhabitants. For the first few days, possibly weeks, prairie dogs translocated to new colony sites (without any deep burrows available) are particularly vulnerable to predation by badgers.

In this instance, we dug "starter burrows" by auguring at an angle at least three feet deep into the ground with a 4-inch posthole auger. That is not nearly enough to provide security from the digging skills of a badger, but it provides a brief underground hiding place with some sense of security.

To make these starter burrows even more accommodating, and consistent with natural burrows, Bruce and Marge Kennedy brought their weed eater and cut the vegetation surrounding many of the starter burrows. We used a mower to accomplish the same around some of the other potential burrows. Prairie dogs prefer short vegetation



adjacent to the burrows so they can see approaching predators and retreat to their burrows when alarmed.

A stock trailer converted to a mobile wildlife viewing blind was parked adjacent to a special smaller enclosure. Corn was placed near the burrows to make sure that they had nutritious food available, even though vegetation was relatively abundant. The area was drought stricken without much grass growth this year in this “old field.”

We captured a disproportional number of young-of-the-year “pups”, but there were some adult prairie dogs. One aggressive “scar-face” male bit down on my gloved finger and held on like a Snapping Turtle! Thick gloves designed for welders made it possible to handle them without being scratched or severely bitten. We treated each with flea powder prior to release.

One by one, they were released, generally head first into the starter burrows. A small quantity of hay was used to cover some burrows to provide an added sense of security for the prairie dogs, and it seemed to accomplish that objective.

During the first day, and into the second quite a few of the pups in the smaller enclosure ran around trying to escape. Sometimes they would try climbing up the poultry netting, stall out as they reached the overhanging netting extending inward, hesitate and then drop or climb back down to the ground two feet below. The electric wire on the inside of the enclosure was not turned on and it never seemed to be necessary to prevent their escape.

By the third day it appeared that all of the prairie dogs were conditioned to run to a nearby burrow and disappear underground. They did not linger above ground.

Potential Limiting Factors: The Vulnerability of Pups in Their First Year of Life

With starter burrows located throughout the large enclosed field, there are certainly a sufficient number of sites for released prairie dogs to establish new burrows now and later. Considering the relatively large area of high-quality habitat available within the

confines of the fenced area, it is unlikely that there will be much if any dispersal pressure in the foreseeable future. In addition to the effectiveness of the fence, tall vegetation serving as a visual barrier surrounds the site just beyond the fence and that will further discourage adventurous prairie dogs.

We are keeping the electric fence wire on the outside of the large enclosure electrified. It may also help deter Coyotes and Badgers from entering the enclosure, but we do not expect it to be impermeable. Badgers have been our greatest concern, and one gained entrance and started devouring prairie dogs within a couple weeks. The first order of business was to make the burrows less accessible to Badgers. That was accomplished by purchasing special panels similar to “cattle panels” but with 4”x4” square openings. They were securely staked to the ground to prevent them from being dislocated. This proved to be effective as a deterrent, but it wasn’t possible to provide cover for every burrow.

The prairie dog colony is one of several wildlife conservation and habitat projects implemented within a 212-acre unit of the Hutton Niobrara Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary designated as the Harold W. “Andy” Andersen Wildlife Habitat Area. Most of that unit was previously cultivated. Native grasses and forbs planted on a 150-acre portion have become a brood-rearing habitat for Sharp-tailed Grouse, and it is a magnet for nesting Dickcissels and Grasshopper Sparrows.



Lana Micheel, Niobrara Sanctuary Coordinator