



*black-tailed prairie dogs near their burrow  
photo by Byron Shipley*

# Natural Resource Bulletin

## Prairie Dogs and Plague

**2011.10.1**

### Frequently Asked Questions:

#### *What is plague?*

Plague is a disease that is caused by the bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*.

#### *How is plague transmitted?*

Plague is most often transmitted by the bite of fleas that have fed on the blood of rodents infected with the plague bacteria.

#### *What can I do to protect my family and pets from plague?*

**AVOID ALL DIRECT CONTACT** with prairie dogs or other wild rodents.

- Keep pets on a leash.
- Do not allow pets to chase, play with or handle wild rodents.
- Do not allow pets to play with or handle dead rodents.
- Do not allow dogs or cats to investigate or loiter around rodent burrows.
- Do not touch sick or dead rodents.
- Teach children to avoid handling sick or dead rodents.
- Do not feed or play with prairie dogs.

#### **AVOID FLEAS.**

- Protect pets with pet-specific flea spray and keep pets away from wild rodent habitats such as prairie dog burrows.

**SEE A PHYSICIAN** if you become ill with a high fever and/or swollen lymph nodes. Plague is treatable.

**SEE A VETERINARIAN** if your pet becomes ill with a high fever or open sore.

Colorado is home to three different species of prairie dog. Only the black-tailed prairie dog lives in Aurora. Prairie dogs offer great wildlife watching opportunities and play an important role in the health of the prairie ecosystem. Many animals including salamanders, toads, rabbits, snakes and insects depend on prairie dog burrows for shelter from heat, cold and predators. Prairie dogs are an important food source for many animals including bald eagles, golden eagles, red-tailed hawks, ferruginous hawks, coyotes and snakes.

The unintentional introduction of plague to the North American prairie in 1899 has had a devastating effect on prairie dog populations.

Understanding what plague is, how plague is transmitted and how to protect your family and pets from exposure to plague can reduce concern related to prairie dogs and plague exposure risk.

Plague is most often spread by the bite of infected fleas that carry the plague bacteria. These fleas feed on seventy-six different species of mammals, but it is primarily a disease of wild rodents *other* than black-tailed prairie dogs. Infected rodents become sick and die. When a large population of rodents dies, the fleas must find another animal to feed on, such as humans and pets.

Though most prairie dogs have fleas, few fleas are infected, and most public health officials believe the chance of humans contracting plague from prairie dog fleas is very low. Generally, prairie dog fleas do not prefer human hosts, choosing instead to bite other animal species. The black-tailed prairie dog is unlikely to contribute to the spread of plague in the United States because plague kills nearly all infected prairie dogs within a very short period of time.

If you suspect a prairie dog colony has succumbed to plague, report your observations immediately to your local health department or to the city. Possible signs that a prairie dog colony has succumbed to plague include:

- A sudden lack of activity (black-tailed prairie dogs do not hibernate, but they often choose to stay in burrows on cold or snowy days). A plague outbreak in a prairie dog colony usually results in 100% mortality.
- A large concentration of flies in and around burrow entrances.

*Sources: Center for Disease Control and Prevention bulletin, 1998; Tri-county Health bulletin, 2004; US Fish and Wildlife Service Black-tailed Prairie Dog page, [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov) (2011)*

*For questions regarding plague, please contact Tri-County Health Department at 303-220-9200. Additional information is available at [www.tchd.org](http://www.tchd.org).*





black-tailed prairie dog foraging on turf  
photo by Tom Gore

## Open Space and Natural Resources Division

We are Stewards of Natural Resources Essential to Aurora's Quality of Life

# Natural Resource Bulletin

## Passive, Non-lethal Prairie Dog Deterrents

2012.9.2

### Frequently Asked Questions:

#### Are prairie dogs a protected species?

Black-tailed prairie dogs (the species of prairie dog found in Aurora) do not have any special designations or protections in Colorado and can be treated or controlled by property owners using legal methods.

#### What can I do if prairie dogs are entering my property from an adjacent property?

It is the responsibility of the property owner to exclude prairie dogs from their property. This resource bulletin offers passive, non-lethal tips and ideas for deterring prairie dogs.

It is always an option to hire a licensed wildlife damage control specialist to assist with mitigating damage from prairie dogs. Use the internet or a local phone book to find local, professional providers.

#### Should I be concerned about disease?

As with any wild animal, it is important to use caution and AVOID ALL DIRECT CONTACT with prairie dogs or other wild rodents.

- Keep pets on a leash.
- Do not allow pets to chase, play with or handle wild rodents.
- Do not allow pets to play with or handle dead rodents.
- Do not allow dogs or cats to investigate or loiter around rodent burrows.
- Do not touch sick or dead rodents.
- Teach children to avoid handling sick or dead rodents.
- Do not feed or play with prairie dogs.

### Understanding three basic prairie dog behaviors may help you deter them:

*Prairie dogs are opportunistic herbivores.* They are adapted to eating the grasses, leaves, seeds and fruits of the shortgrass prairie. Overcrowding and drought can force hungry prairie dogs into adjacent landscapes where they can find delicious non-native alternatives to their normal prairie fare.

*Late summer and early fall are peak times for prairie dog dispersal.* Young-of-the-year male prairie dogs attempt to disperse away from their home colony in the fall. If a colony is in an urban area and is surrounded by homes, businesses and roads, male prairie dogs may attempt to disperse into these less-appropriate areas.

*Mowed areas and short landscaping can encourage prairie dogs.* Prairie dogs are a prey species. They rely on being able to see all around them to protect themselves and warn each other of potential danger. Mowed or trimmed vegetation can be an invitation for foraging or dispersing prairie dogs. Taller grasses and landscaping with plenty of places for potential predators to hide are much less appealing to prairie dogs.

### Landscaping barriers:

Add tall plants and shrubs to create an unwelcoming barrier: Rabbitbrush *Chrysothamnus nauseosus*, Big sage *Artemisia tridentatum*, Salt bush *Atriplex canescens*, and Snakeweed *Gutierrezia sarothrae* are not only tall, but they are also unpalatable (don't taste good) to prairie dogs.

### Fencing barriers:

Keeping prairie dogs out over the long term may require fencing with both visual and burrowing barriers. Solid fencing that is at least three feet high can create a visual barrier, but it is essential to augment fencing with burrowing barriers as well. At the very least keep fences in good repair and flush with the ground, so the animals can't peek through. Burrowing barriers such as metal sheeting, hardware cloth or chicken wire installed at least six inches (2 feet is better) below the bottom of the fence, or placing chicken wire on the ground and out (at least 18") from the fence can deter prairie dogs from burrowing under the fence and daylighting in your yard.

### Other ideas:

Spend time in your yard. Simple disturbances such as you, your pet, children at play or irrigation systems can discourage prairie dogs from foraging or colonizing your yard.

Deter with scent. Scent repellents such as coyote urine\*, ammonia soaked rags, citronella or domestic dog feces can discourage prairie dogs from using burrows or creating burrows in your yard. \*Please note that some scent repellents such as coyote urine may encourage coyotes to enter and investigate the scent.

For more information about prairie dogs, please visit [auroragov.org/nature](http://auroragov.org/nature). You can find additional information about prairie dogs and plague at this site as well.

#### Resources:

*Black-tailed Prairie Dogs in the City*, Denver Parks and Recreation

*Urban and Suburban Black-tailed Prairie Dog Colony Management Handbook*, Prairie Dog Coalition, 2002

*Techniques Used to Establish and Limit Prairie Dog Towns* (Lewis, 1979)

