



## *Shortgrass Prairie Ecosystem Protection*

Stretching across portions of ten states in the Great Plains, the shortgrass prairie was once home to incredibly abundant wildlife, including one hundred million acres of prairie dogs, thundering herds of bison, innumerable pronghorn, healthy populations of plains wolves, grizzly bears, a vast array of songbirds and raptors, carpets of buffalograss and blue grama, and a broad diversity and abundance of wildflowers and butterflies. It was a landscape so teeming with life it has been compared to the African Serengeti and the South American Pampas.

Today, in sharp contrast, the mid-continent grasslands, of which the shortgrass prairie is a significant part, have suffered the greatest biological destruction of any major biome in North America. Scientists have concluded that, globally, grasslands are the most imperiled ecosystems. The three central processes historically shaping the shortgrass prairie were herbivory, drought, and fire. Through habitat destruction, extermination of native herbivores and predators, proliferation of noxious weeds, and altered fire regimes, these processes have been negatively impacted.

Members of the prairie dog ecosystem and grassland breeding birds are two groups of wildlife significantly affected by the impacts of habitat destruction and wildlife persecution in the shortgrass prairie.

### Black-tailed Prairie Dogs & Their Associates

The range of the black-tailed prairie dog once stretched across parts of eleven states in the U.S., in a broad arc from southern Canada through the Great Plains and American Southwest to northern Mexico. Today, black-tailed prairie dogs are found on little more than 1% of their historic acreage in primarily small, isolated colonies. This decline has occurred due to extensive poisoning campaigns, shooting, habitat destruction, and sylvatic plague.

Given the keystone role prairie dogs play in shortgrass prairie habitat, many associated species have become imperiled due to prairie dog declines. The black-footed ferret, which depends on prairie dogs for over 90% of its diet and cannot survive outside of prairie dog colonies, narrowly escaped extinction and remains one of the most endangered animals in the world. The mountain plover, a

grassland bird that breeds on prairie dog colonies, has dwindled in population by 66% since the 1960s. Other close associates of prairie dogs suffering from a paucity of prairie dogs and their habitat include the swift fox, ferruginous hawk, and burrowing owl. Altogether, over 140 wildlife species may be negatively impacted from the loss of prairie dog colonies.

With continued prairie dog decreases resulting from ongoing, multiple threats, ecosystem collapse will likely occur unless there is a paradigm shift in how this keystone species is managed.

### Grassland Breeding Birds

Grassland breeding birds are also on a downward spiral. Of the 28 birds classified in this guild, some 24 have demonstrated decreasing trends from 1966-2002. In addition, of the nine birds classified as endemic to U.S. grasslands, six are declining. Grassland endemics are: mountain plover, McCown's longspur, ferruginous hawk, long-billed curlew, lark bunting, chestnut collared longspur, Sprague's pipit, Baird's sparrow, and Cassin's sparrow. Collectively these species represent the most rapidly declining guild of birds nationwide.

The habitat needs for grassland breeding birds vary from bare ground and short vegetation to mid-grass prairie and shrubs. They have been impacted to varying degrees, depending on their habitat requirements, by conversion of native prairie to cropland, livestock overgrazing, noxious weed proliferation, oil and gas development, herbicide and pesticide application, and eradication of keystone species.

### Forest Guardians' Advocacy for Shortgrass Prairie

Forest Guardians has led the effort to obtain Endangered Species Act (ESA) listing for the black-tailed prairie dog and mountain plover. The black-tailed prairie dog is currently a candidate for ESA listing, but such listing will not occur without our litigation. In September 2003, a proposal to list the mountain plover under the ESA was withdrawn, despite the critically imperiled status of this bird. Our advocacy efforts include challenging numerous oil and gas development projects and a variety of federal and state proposals that harm members of the prairie dog ecosystem and grassland breeding birds.

For the prairie dog ecosystem, Forest Guardians' geographic focus is the southern Great Plains and American Southwest, as we recognize other groups are working for ecosystem recovery in the northern Great Plains. In addition, we are active in the national Prairie Dog Coalition, which brings together various groups and individuals advocating prairie dog protection and ecosystem recovery. We helped organize the 2003 Prairie Dog Summit in Denver, CO, and we have an active outreach campaign promoting the protection of black-tailed prairie dogs and other keystone species.

Visit [www.fguardians.org](http://www.fguardians.org) or call 505-988-9126 for more information and to volunteer in the Forest Guardians effort to preserve and restore native wildlands and wildlife in the American Southwest. Contact us for scientific citations on the shortgrass prairie.