

1997
UTAH PRARIE DOG REPORT

**Bryce Canyon National Park,
Utah**

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Introduction

The Utah prairie dog, *Cynomys parvidens*, is the western-most of the genus *Cynomys*. The species' range, which is limited to the southwestern quarter of Utah, is the most restricted of all prairie dog species in the United States. At one time, the total species distribution was estimated to be 95,000 animals prior to control programs in the 1920's.

By the 1960's, the Utah prairie dog species distribution was greatly reduced due to disease (plague), poisoning, drought and human related habitat alterations resulting from cultivation and grazing practices. Studies by Collier and Spillett indicated that the Utah prairie dog had declined or been eliminated from major portions of its estimated historical range. By 1972, they estimated that there were 3,300 Utah prairie dogs in 37 separate colonies. It appeared from this estimate that the Utah prairie dog would be extinct by the year 2000.

The Utah prairie dog was listed as an endangered species on June 4, 1973, pursuant to the Endangered Species Conservation Act of 1969. Due to a general increase in population numbers in the early 1980's, UDWR petitioned the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove the Utah prairie dog from the endangered species list. Upon reviewing all pertinent biological data, the USFWS determined that the Utah prairie dog was not currently in danger of extinction and published the Final Rule reclassifying the species to threatened in the May 29, 1984 Federal Register.

The Utah prairie dog was reintroduced into Bryce Canyon National Park in 1974. Additional prairie dogs were occasionally transplanted into the park until 1987. Since then, their numbers have averaged about 185. In the fall of 1992, 114 dog were trapped in the park and relocated to the Awapa Plateau.

Census Objectives

1. To determine prairie dog population and distribution in the park.
2. To determine population trends by comparison with previous census data.
3. To determine colony variations.

Methods

1. Each colony within complexes is identified by an alphanumeric code. This code is marked on maps used to conduct the census.
2. Counts should be completed before June 1. This will ensure that only adult prairie dogs will be counted since the young will not emerge prior this date.
3. Counts should only be conducted on calm, clear days when the temperature is above 50 degrees F. Prairie dogs also tend to stay underground on days when "wispy" clouds are blowing over.
4. Counts are best done during mid-morning or early afternoons.

5. Only adult prairie dogs are counted. If conducted by June 1, all visible prairie dogs should be adults.
6. Counting is ideally done when the prairie dogs are alarmed and subsequently stand up to scan for predators, but not too alarmed to cause them to go underground.
7. To count, slowly approach colony, preferably in a vehicle, and scan with binoculars or a spotting scope. Maintain enough distance to not cause them to hide underground.
8. Once you have obtained a consistent count, slowly approach the colony to get them to give an alarm “bark”. Once a prairie dog gives the alarm bark, stop where you are and do another count. Often their barking will incite the other prairie dogs to stand up and look for the approaching predator, making them easier to count.
9. Record the highest count. If you feel the count is not accurate, return to the colony at a future date and repeat the procedure.
10. Check the map for accuracy of colony boundaries. If the colony has expanded, or new colonies are noted, record the boundaries on the map in red.
11. Use the standardized data sheets to record the date, time, location, complex-colony numbers, counts, and any comments.

Results and Discussion

Utah prairie dog survey was conducted between May 14 and May 28, 1997. All complexes were surveyed on two different days to ensure accuracy of the count at each site. Two surveyors counted prairie dogs at each complex with the highest count being recorded. The spring survey was conducted by Doug Neighbor, Juli Ames-Curtis, Cyndi Lindh, and Yvonne Bloch. The following table lists surveyed complexes. Also, attached at the end of the document are maps indicating the size of each complex.

1997 Utah Prairie Dog Spring Count

Date	Time	Complex	Letter	Count	Comments
5/22/97	11:15	213		3	All seen on S. side of road. Sunny
5/14/97	10:30	215	A	6	Clear and sunny.
5/22/97	10:30	215	B	0	Sunny. Looks like abandon habitat.
5/14/97	11:45	215	C	6	Sunny.
5/22/97	12:10	215	D	19	At first, two horses w/ riders in main mixing circle.
5/28/97	11:45	218	A	14	Sunny and windy.
5/14/97	11:32	218	B	2	
5/22/97	11:13	218	D	1	
5/22/97	12:02	218	E	7	
5/22/97	11:45	218	F	1	
Total				59	

A total of 59 Utah prairie dogs were counted this year. This is the third consecutive year the spring count has declined in numbers (see **Error! Not a valid bookmark self-reference.**, on page 1). This is not due to the loss of a prairie dog complex but due to and overall decline at each complex. This decline maybe attributed to lower than average precipitation since 1994. Fortunately the population has not decline below the 1984 through 1986 levels.

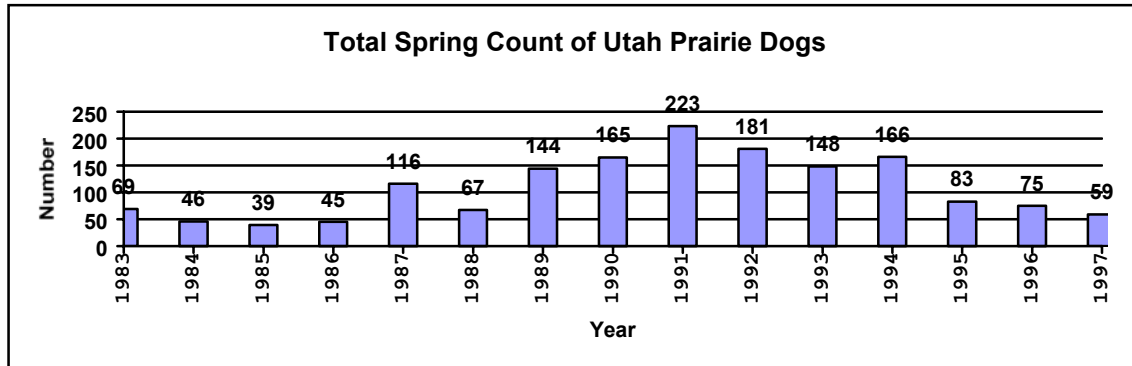


Figure 1: Annual Spring Utah Prairie Dog Count