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Gunnison's Prairie Dogs
Cynomys gunnisoni

Description: Yellowish buff mixed with black above, slightly paler below. Short, white-tipped tail. Terminal half of tail grayish white in center. 12-14" in height, weighing 23-42 ounces. Lives 3-5 years in the wild, longer in captivity.

Similar Species: White-tailed and Utah prairie dogs have white in center of tail rather than grayish. Black-tailed Prairie Dog's tail has black tip.

Breeding: 1 litter per year of 1-8 young, born in early May; gestation 27-33 days, pups emerge mid June.

Habitat: Short grass prairies in high mountain valleys and plateaus of southern Rocky Mountains at elevations of 6,000-12,000' (1,800-3,600 m). Habitat is much more variable topographically and vegetationally than that of the Black-tailed Prairie Dog, which occurs at lower elevations.

Range: Southeastern Utah, south and central Colorado, northeast and central Arizona, and northwest New Mexico.

Discussion: Gunnison's Prairie Dog, like the rest of its kin, is active only when the sun is up, and is most energetic near dawn and dusk. It is constantly vigilant while aboveground, often sitting upright on its hind feet while it pursues its main activities: mainly feeding, but also grooming and playing. This animal generally is seen from April to October. It hibernates (torpor) in winter, living on stored body fat. It usually emerges in April, though they will emerge earlier if the winter is mild. Gunnison's Prairie Dog feeds on green vegetation, particularly grasses, but also forbs, sedges, and shrubs, as well as a few insects. Its colonies are generally smaller and less closely knit than those of other prairie dogs, resembling ground squirrel aggregations, with fewer than 50 to 100 individuals. The animals in the colony cannot always see one another because their habitat is in such varied and patchy terrain, which is caused in part by human activities. On flat ground and where this prairie dog is protected colonies are much larger and more extensive. This species' burrow systems can be up to 80 feet long and 16 feet deep in well-established colonies. Burrows can have food storage, flood, nesting, communal and excrement chambers. Territoriality is not well developed in Gunnison's Prairie Dog, although old males may defend small areas outside their burrows. Mother-young relationships form the basic social unit. Newborns remain in the burrow about three weeks before emerging and are weaned about three weeks later. The female sits almost straight up on her haunches to nurse her young, who suckle either pectoral or inguinal (hind leg) nipples. Gunnison's alarm call, distinctive among prairie dogs, is important to the survival and structure of the community. It is a series of high-pitched barks of one or two distinct syllables, with the second syllable lower and more guttural. The call may be repeated frequently and may continue for as long as half an hour. It increases in intensity as danger escalates, and ends in chatter as the animal enters its burrow. Predators include American Badgers, Coyotes, weasels, and raptors. Plague (*Yersinia pestis*), carried by fleas, can decimate populations of this species. However, humans, through their extermination programs, are the chief enemy of Gunnison's Prairie Dog.