



Wild Lands Advocate 12(2): 15, April 2004

Burrowing Owls not Welcome in Winter Home

One of the places Canada's prairie burrowing owl migrates to during the winter is a wastewater treatment field site for the City of Lubbock in Texas. However, Lubbock is unhappy with the population of black-tailed prairie dogs on the Lubbock Land Application Site (LLAS). This site has one of the largest remaining prairie dog colonies on the Southern Plains. Abandoning their prairie dog management plan, the City of Lubbock decided to exterminate the rodents with the use of a highly toxic gas, Phostoxin, which is put into burrows where it forms phosphine gas and kills everything inside (mammals, birds, insects, reptiles), including burrowing owls.

There is a general resentment by city (and LLAS) managers toward the prairie dogs and burrowing owls using this site. The City thinks the animals are eating too much of the nitrate-absorbing vegetation, although there is no evidence that implicates the prairie dogs in elevated nitrate levels.

Just recently, the city biologist has agreed to temporarily stop the poisoning because of the presence of so many owls. Since city managers are worried about being fined \$50,000 for each bird they kill, they are waiting for the owls to leave. However, some of the owls live there year-round. Texas PEER, PETA, the Humane Society, Llano Escatado Audubon Society (LEAS), Citizens for Prairie Dogs and others are working together, exploring any viable angles for effective action.

"Based on informal surveys taken over the last six years, LEAS can state that there are hundreds of burrowing owls on the LLAS site during the breeding season," said LEAS President Anthony Floyd about burrowing owl utilization of the 600 acres of the LLAS. "Breeding birds start arriving in February and breeding pairs and their families are on the site through late September. This has been the largest colony of burrowing owls that LEAS was aware of until recent efforts by the City of Lubbock to exterminate prairie dogs reduced the number of breeding sites for these owls.

"The LLAS is the single site we recommend to visiting birders (in the winter) who wish to see burrowing owls. Any reputable biologist using standard survey techniques would find burrowing owls on the LLAS – any time of the year. Indeed, the Lubbock Convention and Visitor's Bureau recently put an advertisement in the April 2004 issue of *Birder's World* magazine extolling the birdwatching opportunities of Lubbock, beginning with burrowing owls!

"There is absolutely no way that burrows can be poisoned from February through September without killing and/or displacing pairs or families of burrowing owls and violating the Migratory Bird Species Act. Poisoning from October through January will kill or displace fewer owls, but will undoubtedly kill a large number of non-target species, including the protected Texas horned lizard and, possibly, protected raptors that eat dead prairie dogs."

Lubbock City Councillor Frank Morrison recently responded to an e-mail from a concerned LEAS member saying, "First, this is not some natural habitat. We use these fields for applying our effluent water. 'Birding' is not an appealing idea. Second, there aren't a 'few hundred.' There are several thousand. They are destroying the natural and established habitat. Third, I wouldn't expect someone from the Hill Country to understand, but, prairie dogs and their partners, the burrowing owls, exist in plague numbers out here. They are devastating to native lands and farmland alike ... but thanks for caring."

The black-tailed prairie dog population has already been significantly reduced. The City has not conducted formal counts, nor have they encouraged formal counts, but there has been at least a 40 to 60 per cent reduction of usable habitat due to ploughing of the land.





The City of Lubbock sought out LEAS and several other wildlife organizations to help them develop a prairie dog management plan. The prairie dog management plan hammered out in 2002 with the City, Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Llano Estacado Audubon Society allowed for the control of prairie dogs under pivots only if they had exhausted the measures outlined in the plan.

Although there is much political pressure urging the City to halt the extermination, there doesn't appear to be any obvious legal recourse. However, one creative approach is for a Canadian environmental agency, such as Environment Canada, to file a complaint with the Commission for Environmental Cooperation alleging that the U.S. is not properly enforcing its environmental laws, which Canada has a legal stake in because of NAFTA.

For a complete history of this situation, and to take action, visit the LEAS website at www.leas.bizland.com/prairiedog.htm.

