

~ LIVING WITH WILDLIFE ~

RICHARDSON'S GROUND SQUIRRELS



NATURAL HISTORY

Often referred to as “gophers”, Richardson’s Ground Squirrels are part of the rodent family. They are 40-48 cm long including their bushy tail, and weigh 0.5-1.5 kg. Adult coloration is grayish brown while the young are reddish-brown. Their litters range from 2-8. The young are born in April but remain underground for their first month. Even though they are born in a 1 to 1 distribution, there are always more females than males because males have a lower survival rate, usually only living 2-3 years. Females can live up to 6 years. The ground squirrel’s den is an intricate burrow with several entrances, multiple chambers and interconnecting tunnels. Ground squirrels are not as social as Prairie Dogs but may group together and live in colonies. They hate the rain and will stay underground until it is calm and sunny.

Primarily herbivores, ground squirrels eat plant material but also prey on insects, the eggs and young of ground nesting birds and occasionally small mammals. Ground squirrels are active during the day and sleep at night. Richardson’s Ground Squirrels are true winter hibernators that put on weight during summer. In the spring they must dig their way out as their hibernaculum is sealed to the outside. The males emerge first in February or March and stay out for just 105 days. Females come out about two weeks later and go back into hibernation after 109 days.

The ground squirrels’ main enemies are owls, coyotes, foxes, weasels, badgers and hawks. They have complex

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communication, giving different calls for different predators.

SITUATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

GROUND SQUIRRELS DAMAGING RANGE OR CROPLAND: In creating their burrows and grazing down the grasses around them, ground squirrels are performing their natural function. Solutions may include:

- Do not overgraze your property as ground squirrels are attracted to short grasses.
- Creating habitat that encourages ground squirrels' predators such as foxes and weasels will help keep the populations under control.
- Welcoming coyotes and badgers to your property will also aid in reducing the numbers.
- Nesting or perching platforms will attract birds of prey. For example, one family of (6) Ferruginous Hawks can eat up to 400 ground squirrels during one summer.
- Do not use poison as it has serious adverse consequences on the food chain.
- There has been some success using high frequency deterrents. These inexpensive devices are placed at ground level and send sound waves underground that annoy the ground squirrels and may drive them out of the area.
- Understanding and tolerance is key as ground squirrels are a vital part of the food chain. Eradicating an entire population would have a drastic effect on numerous other species. For example, the Ferruginous Hawk is an endangered species and feeds primarily on ground squirrels. Thus reducing the ground squirrel population will have severe consequences for the hawks.



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