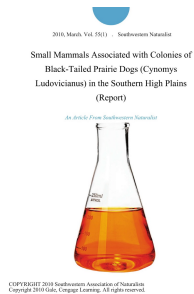


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## SMALL MAMMALS ASSOCIATED WITH COLONIES OF BLACK TAILED PRAIRIE DOGS CYNOMYS LUDOVICIANUS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGH PLAINS REPORT EBOOKS 2019



Author: Southwestern Naturalist

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Prairie dogs (*Cynomys*) often are touted as a keystone species within the Great Plains ecosystem. If adhering to the definition of a keystone species as one whose impact on its community or ecosystem is disproportionately large relative to its abundance (Power et al., 1996), prairie dogs do appear to be keystone species (Kotliar et al., 1999). Prairie dogs are not high in the trophic chain, but they substantively influence their ecosystem (Kotliar et al., 1999). Burrowing and grazing by prairie dogs results in continual disturbance in and around the colony (Hansen and Gold, 1977; Whicker and Detling, 1988). These activities result in a mosaic of grasses and forbs by bringing nutrient-rich soils to the surface and preventing encroachment of woody shrubs on rangelands (Hansen and Gold, 1977; Whicker and Detling, 1988; Weltzin et al., 1997). Grazing by prairie dogs also keeps vegetation on colonies at a lower and more nutritional seral stage (Birch, 1977; Agnew et al., 1986). This is believed to account for preferential grazing on colonies of prairie dogs by elk (*Cervus elaphus*), pronghorns (*Antilocapra americana*), and bison (*Bison bison*; Coppock et al., 1983; Knowles, 1986; Assal, 2001). This vegetative growth stage also is believed to be selected by several species of small rodents (e.g., *Peromyscus maniculatus*; Birch, 1977). Burrows of prairie dogs provide refuge and shelter for burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*) and numerous species of small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians (Campbell and Clark, 1981; Sharps and Rusk, 1990; Kotliar, 2000; McCaffrey, 2001). In general, colonies of prairie dogs are associated with a higher diversity and abundance of fauna compared to non-colonized grasslands (Hansen and Gold, 1977; Miller et al., 1994; Kotliar et al., 1999). Several studies have reported that densities of small mammals tend to be greater on colonies than on non-colony sites (Agnew, 1983; Agnew et al., 1986; Ceballos et al., 1999). However, differences in measures of species richness between colonies and non-colony sites have been inconsistent among studies (Agnew, 1983; Agnew et al., 1986; Stapp, 1998).

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