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Prairie Dog Control

A. Orville Sandall
State Trapper, South Dakota Department of Game, Fish, and Parks

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by

A. Orville Sandall
State Trapper
South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks

Before poisons were taken from the market, I had about fifteen years experience working for the Fish and Wildlife Service doing prairie dog control work. Most of this work was done for private landowners and supervising work crews for the Forest Service, and B&A.

I can fully see why a rancher would not want 50 acres of prairie dogs in his cow pasture or why a farmer would not want 30 acres of prairie dogs at the side of his wheat field. And I can see why a true lover of nature would not want any control work.

And, in case you think we only have a few prairie dogs in my area of southwestern South Dakota, let's look at the Canata basin which is mostly Buffalo Gap National Grassland. On the north side of the basin where I run my coyote survey route which is fifteen miles long, I drive seven miles in prairie dog towns. On the south side of this basin, about six years ago, we were taking an estimate of dog town acres for the B&A and Forest Service, and found one town of 1400 acres; to the northwest a town of 200 acres; to the north about 80 acres; and south, 500 acres. Now we have one large prairie dog town. The only control work done in that area for the past five years has been sport shooting.

My prairie dog control work all started back in the 1950s with a sack of 1080 oats with instructions on the side and plenty of ambition, I took after my first prairie dog complaint. Watching this dog town for an hour, I found they have a small area about two feet from the mound they seem t

prefer, so that was the place to put the oats. The best time of the year seemed to be from July 1 to November 15 if the temperature was above 55 degrees and the grass very dry.

Best results were with 1080 oats. I also noticed that with 1080 oats the birds did not like the bright color and walked away as though they were in something they didn't like. Although a few were found on poisoned dog towns.

Strychnine oats left a pretty sad looking dog town. The action of strychnine was very fast.

A small amount of zinc phosphide oats was used and on checking back on the dog towns, I found it had done a very good job and no birds or other animals besides prairie dogs were found.

In working a dog town, I believe a person must cover at least 95% of the holes to get good results.

A lot of time was spent looking for black-footed ferrets. Only one was ever found when checking for them, but I did get to watch this ferret for about half an hour. It finally went down a hole and a prairie dog covered up the hole. Predators were seen on dog towns and only once did I see a coyote catch a prairie dog and then the dog got away and went down a hole.

Here is some information on the bait can mounted to the handle bars of a two-wheeled scooter, built for off-the-highway travel and used in the spreading of poisoned oats for the control of prairie dogs. I can only report on what experience I have had using the bait can and scooter in the last five years for my own use and a small amount of time working with the Bureau of Indian Affairs out of Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

On checking the number of prairie dog holes per acre, the actual measurement of five acres of an old and well-established dog town was taken, working from the center to the outside and the hole count ran 49, 42, 32, 27 and 19 for an average of a little over 33 holes per acre. Checking the measuring device on the bait can that measures the poisoned oats, we found it had to be tripped forty-eight times to release one pound of oats

so we were using a little over one-half pound of oats per acre of prairie dog in an average dog town. I am referring to the use of 1080 oats, and believe when the strychnine-type oats is used, the measuring device should be set so at least one pound of oats per acre is used, or the handle released twice at each mound.

Marking out the dog town is very important so the scooter rider may have a line to work by. This can easily be done by laying out lands seventy-five to a hundred feet in width by driving a vehicle back and forth. Usually there is enough vegetation or the tire tracks will show on the bare ground. We believe full coverage the first time over cannot be stressed enough.

Operation of the scooter with bait can attached can be accomplished by anyone capable of riding a bicycle and able to guide the machine over the side of the prairie dog mound, or over the feeding area which is usually near each mound, tripping the biat release handle at the right time letting the speed traveled spread the oats.

We will admit using the machine is by far faster than walking, but smooth surface or rough hilly areas could make quite a difference in the speed of the operation. Once an estimated five acres of dog town was covered in nine minutes. I believe after taking all surface conditions into consideration, an experienced rider should cover an average of twenty acres per hour.

Two different makes of scooter have been used in prairie dog control work the Cushman Trailster and Tote Gote. Both have an automatic type transmission which is ideal for slowing to turn and a sudden burst of speed needed on the straight away; also both are very maneuverable and handle with ease. The Cushman has a small front wheel riding on two springs and a larger back wheel which gives a smoother ride to the operator but it weighs more than the Tote Gote which makes a problem for one man to load before traveling between dog towns. The Tote Gote with front spring suspension and a two-wheel that seem to be the same size as the front wheel on the Cushman, gives a rougher ride, but this can be overcome by mounting a larger spring-loaded bicycle

type seat to replace the foam rubber seat Tote Gote is equipped with. These bicycle type seats may be found at used motorcycle shops. Also, there is the problem of cactus spines working their way into the tires. This situation was taken care of by using a stop leak sold to seal leaks in bicycle tires.