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Spring 2006

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Reading, Richard, "Review of *Prairie Dog Empire: A Saga of the Shortgrass Prairie* By Paul A. Johnsgard" (2006). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 818.
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Prairie Dog Empire: A Saga of the Shortgrass Prairie.

By Paul A. Johnsgard. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. xiii + 243 pp. Maps, illustrations, tables, appendixes, references, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Prairie Dog Empire provides a semitechnical overview on what some ecologists refer to as the Prairie Dog Ecosystem, focused on black-tailed prairie dogs (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) and their associated vertebrate species. Given the controversy surrounding management of prairie dogs, it is surprising that such a volume has not been published previously. Leave it to that prolific guru of the Great Plains, Paul Johnsgard, to pen a book directed at filling that void at such a crucial juncture.

Most ecologists agree that black-tailed prairie dogs play a keystone role in the Great Plains, yet the species has declined precipitously over the past 125-plus years. Johnsgard takes a strong conservationist approach to relating the story of the plight of prairie dogs and their associates. The book begins with a brief history and description of the shortgrass prairie. The following six chapters describe some of the most obvious and well-known vertebrate inhabitants of this region, starting with bison (*Bison bison*), then

discussing prairie dogs (with brief accounts on all five species, but focusing on black-taileds); the most important mammalian predators of prairie dogs; other species associated with prairie dogs; species of the High Plains; and finally raptors. These brief accounts review some of the literature and are richly illustrated with line drawings by the author.

The next three chapters begin to relate the controversy surrounding prairie dogs and other species of the prairies. The first of these provides a sobering discussion of predator, especially coyote (*Canis latrans*), and prairie dog control operations over the past 135 years, but focusing on the recent past. From there Johnsgard offers a critical assessment of agricultural practices in the Great Plains from settlement to the current situation, ending with a call for increased bison ranching. The last of this set of chapters focuses on the main federal agencies managing land in the Plains: the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, and Fish and Wildlife Service. This chapter is descriptive—and for the first three agencies quite disparaging of their management approaches.

The book ends with a short chapter summarizing the decimation of Native Americans, bison, and prairie dogs of the Great Plains, briefly identifying some conservation activities underway in the region and calling for action to restore at least a portion of this important component of America's natural heritage. The book also includes a 41-page appendix providing a quick guide to most of the larger (over 500 acres, 202 hectares) natural areas remaining in the High Plains. Maps and Web or e-mail contact information would have improved this section.

Overall, *Prairie Dog Empire* is a quick, highly readable book that suffers only slightly from a few inaccuracies, additional data that were overlooked, and some reliance on “older” information that has since been corrected or altered. Importantly, Johnsgard's lucid style has the ability to bring this fascinating, important, and timely story to thousands of readers. **Richard P. Reading**, *Conservation Biology Director, Denver Zoological Foundation*.