

# The Plight of the Prairie Dog

A new HSUS partnership aims to help these charismatic yet besieged animals



**For some people**, a prairie dog colony is nothing more than an underground nest of troublesome rodents. But Lindsey Sterling Krank sees something magical in the intricate warrens of these gregarious creatures native only to North America.

As director of the Prairie Dog Coalition, Sterling Krank savors the chance to observe and film the animals as they stand alert atop their painstakingly scraped burrows and chirp warnings of intruders to family and friends nestled as deep as 16 feet below. She enjoys watching them venture out to forage, bask in the sun, groom and kiss each other, and roll around in play. She's touched by their gentle nature, remembering an injured prairie dog who stroked her face while being rehabilitated during a colony relocation, his fear turned to trust. And she's awed by their essential role in the prairie ecosystem, providing food and shelter for a vast number of species. "I have never seen as much wildlife in one area as I do around a prairie dog colony—everything from birds to small animals to predators," she says.

But there's a dark side to Sterling Krank's close work with the animals: She has witnessed them being poisoned, shot for sport, or otherwise killed while their colonies are bulldozed and even blown up to make way for development. Considered "varmints" by many ranchers and farmers and their allies in government agencies, the five species of prairie dogs have plummeted in population by 95 percent following decades of persecution, loss of habitat, death from plague, and even capture for the pet trade. Today, they occupy less than 2 to

8 percent of their historic ranges, which once spread over vast areas in 12 states and portions of Mexico and Canada. Many scientists believe they may soon disappear.

Under the auspices of the Prairie Dog Coalition, wildlife biologists, activists, conservationists, and nonprofits are trying to reverse that trend—by promoting nonlethal alternatives to poisoning, seeking protections under federal environmental laws, educating the public about the importance of conservation, and even relocating colonies when no other alternative exists. This September, the coalition's work got a significant boost when it became a program of The HSUS.



## UNDERGROUND HOUSES

Prairie dog burrows include front and back doors, sleeping quarters, storage chambers, and even nurseries

The new partnership builds on the organizations' joint efforts in South Dakota's Conata Basin, which houses the largest remaining colony on public lands in the Great Plains and is bordered in part by privately owned cattle grazing land. Bowing to pressure from a handful of local ranchers and land owners, the U.S.

Forest Service has poisoned hundreds of thousands of prairie dogs in the basin and surrounding grasslands since 2004—a detriment not just to their populations but to other species as well: The area is the most successful recovery site in the country for the endangered black-footed ferret, whose survival is closely tied to that of prairie dogs, their main prey.

Through a campaign launched in 2007, the Prairie Dog Coalition helped influence the Forest Service to dramatically reduce the poisoning, gaining a stay of execution for prairie dogs spread across

16,000 acres in the region. The agency installed a fence partially funded by The HSUS and the coalition, with a tall grass buffer zone planted on one side. Prairie dogs avoid the grass because they can't see predators lurking there, says Sterling Krank; this natural barrier keeps them from migrating onto private land, where they could be poisoned.

The groups continue to advocate for peaceful coexistence in the Conata Basin and other areas. The HSUS's Dave Pauli, a longtime coalition member, hopes to set up demonstration colonies to showcase nonlethal methods of control; visual barriers keep prairie dogs from expanding their burrows, for instance, and features such as raptor perches invite natural predators. Pauli also encourages Indian tribes to replace killing with appreciation—by hosting ecotourists to observe and celebrate the species.

Poisoning isn't the only threat The HSUS and the Prairie Dog Coalition have tackled. They helped provide funding for the Forest Service to dust about 11,000 acres in the Conata Basin with insecti-

cide that kills fleas carrying the sylvatic plague, which can wipe out a colony in two days. And since 2005, The HSUS has been working to end killing contests, where shooters train high-powered rifles on the animals as they emerge from their burrows to socialize and feed. Legal in every state except Colorado, these contests typically award points for such feats as killing two or more prairie dogs with one bullet or flipping one through the air, says Casey Pheiffer, manager of The HSUS's Wildlife Abuse Campaign.

As people begin to realize the fragile status of the species in the modern world, scientists believe they've only just started to understand the prairie dog's character. "These animals have such endearing qualities, many of which are shared by humans," says Con Slobodchikoff, a biology professor at Northern Arizona University who has been studying prairie dogs for more than 20 years. "And the more we know about them, the more people will empathize with them and get the conservation message out." — *Ruthanne Johnson*

## The Dirt on Prairie Dogs

► **CHECKERBOARD OF PROTECTIONS** Prairie dogs are considered nuisance animals in most states. Of the five species of prairie dogs—Utah, Mexican, black-tailed, white-tailed, and Gunnison's—only the Utah and Mexican are federally protected. In Arizona, the only state that provides any serious protections to the animals, black-tailed prairie dogs were reintroduced in 2008 after being extirpated from the state. In northern Arizona, the Gunnison's species is subjected to an annual hunting season and may someday need similar assistance.

► **BURROW BOONS** At least nine species depend on prairie dogs for food and shelter, including endangered black-footed ferrets—who feed almost exclusively on them—as well as swift foxes, burrowing owls, mountain plovers, and ferruginous hawks. Overall, about 200 vertebrate species are associated in some form with prairie dogs and their burrows, says Con Slobodchikoff, a biology professor at Northern Arizona University.

The burrows allow rainwater to percolate into the ground, and when prairie dogs dig out and clean them in the spring, he explains, they churn and soften the region's notoriously hard ground, which in turn helps fertilize the soil and distribute plant seeds.

These advantageous structures are far different from the images of dangerous holes conjured by ranchers and farmers who claim that the burrows cause grazing animals to trip and break limbs. HSUS senior director for wildlife response Dave Pauli is surprised that this myth endures, as prairie dogs build high mounds around burrow entrances to prevent flooding, a sufficient visual signal for deterring accidents.

► **BENEFICIAL BROWSERS** Prairie Dog Coalition director Lindsey Sterling Krank says studies belie the long-held belief that prairie dogs compete with grazing cattle for grass. "Prairie dogs living in an ecosystem are not going to overgraze it," she says. "In fact, they keep out invasive species and maintain the native flora." The clipped blades resprout

into a more digestible, tender nutritional delicacy for large herbivores; cows, antelope, and bison actually prefer prairie dog habitat for this neat landscaping.

► **MASTER LINGUISTS** Prairie dogs have a sophisticated language system, says Slobodchikoff; they can describe to each other people's size and shape, as well as the color of their clothing, and they seem to remember when they've seen someone before.

Field studies have revealed prairie dogs also describing never-before-seen objects to one another, a feat that suggests a higher capacity for analysis than previously realized. "Perhaps prairie dogs have thought about the world around them," says Slobodchikoff, who conducted the research. "And if they do, then maybe they and other animals are a lot closer to us than we have given them credit for."



In addition to their complex vocalizations, prairie dogs communicate through smell and touch, often tapping each other's teeth in greeting.

**Sinking Feeling:** If your habitat were melting into the ocean, you'd need help, too. That's just what's happening to polar bears as climate change chomps away at their icy home, shrinking their feeding platforms and threatening their survival. The last thing these beautiful bears need is another manmade danger—but that's what they get from Canada, the only country in the world still exporting polar bear trophies and their skins. Humane Society International, working with other animal groups, is urging the 175 countries that participate in CITES—the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora—to stop the global commercial trade in polar bears, whom the U.S. listed as threatened last year. HSI is seeking support for a U.S. proposal to transfer the species from CITES Appendix II, which allows regulated international commercial trade, to Appendix I, which prohibits all such trade. "Canada exported the skins or trophies of nearly 700 polar bears in 2007, the largest on record," says HSI vice president Kitty Block, who plans to attend the CITES meeting in March, held in Qatar. "At the same time, more than half of Canada's populations are declining. This must be stopped."



## A Trifecta of Equine Rescues



**Their heads hanging low** and their skeletal frames almost motionless, scores of hungry horses living on a Bradyville, Tenn., farm recently experienced the change in fortune they must have been craving: the arrival of HSUS rescuers armed with hay and a determination to get them out of harm's way.

Two days before Thanksgiving, the team worked with the Cannon County Sheriff's Department and local groups to seize the 84 horses and transport them to an emergency shelter, along with eight dogs, two goats, and 14 chickens. The owner's decision to surrender the animals for good has paved the way for placement with rescues and lifelong homes.

It was the team's third horse deployment of the month. Less than two weeks earlier, re-

sponders had also helped a sheriff's office and local humane organizations remove 25 horses from the OK Trading Post in Arkansas, where many were underweight and suffering from saddle sores. And just days before that, The HSUS had worked with the Baltimore health department and Days End Farm Horse Rescue to remove 19 horses living beneath a bridge in rat-infested stalls filled with feces, urine, and standing water; local fruit and vegetable merchants had been keeping them to pull produce carts. The animals were transported to greener pastures at Days End in Woodbine, Md.

➤ **WEB EXTRA:** View a video update about the Tennessee horses at [humanesociety.org/magazine](http://humanesociety.org/magazine).

## V.I.P. Passengers

The 76 million pets who travel with their families each year can now get an upgrade to first-class. Honda recently debuted its Dog Friendly Element, which includes a cushioned pet bed and a folding ramp so poodles can stroll into the vehicle. Pet restraints, an electric fan, seat covers, rubber mats, and a spill-proof water bowl are also part of the package. And while road-tripping may be Rover's favorite way to travel, the skies are becoming friendlier for animals as well. This summer, Pet Airways launched its pets-only airline, now serving eight U.S. cities. The Florida-based company transports four-legged jet-setters in bright, climate-controlled cabins. While there won't be any in-flight movies or cocktails, attendants keep tabs on their passengers, and the voyage ends with bathroom breaks, food, and water.



## Spay Day Spokesdog

**At just 6 weeks old**, Gus was suffering from parvo and tick fever on an Arizona Indian reservation. Four years later, he serves as a kitten pillow and is known for chasing “Garys” in the backyard.

Saved by the Tuba City Humane Society, the Lab mix is now the big brother of the house he shares in Spirit Lake, Idaho, with Lanmana Parys; her husband, Chris Ervin; and any other rescued animals they happen to be caring for, including horses, goats, cats, mice, and two other dogs named Pork Chop and Zooba.

Gus is “4 going on 20; he acts like an old man. He’s even prematurely graying,” says Parys. But when set loose on his 10-acre property, he’s a different dog: “He’s the fastest couch potato you’ve ever seen.” The speed is useful for chasing Garys—the couple’s nickname for woodland creatures, as in “Gary the gopher.”

One day last year, Gus snuggled up for a nap with four foster kittens. “More often than not, the kittens would lay all over him, some even trying to nurse on him,” Parys says. The cuddling seemed especially cozy, and “the look on Gus’ face seemed to explain it all.” She captured the moment and won first place in The Humane Society of the United States and Humane Society International Spay Day Online Pet Photo Contest.

The 45,000-plus pet lovers who entered the contest last year generated nearly \$550,000 to benefit the spay/neuter efforts of more than 200 animal groups that participated in Spay Day. The annual event, coordinated by The HSUS and carried out by hundreds of groups worldwide, has resulted in spay/neuters of more than 1.5 million dogs and cats since 1995. The effort is one of many HSUS initiatives intended to help end the annual euthanasia of 3 million healthy, treatable pets and bring about more happy endings for animals like Gus.

Though Gus is still the center of his world, it may be time for someone else to strike a pose. “Maybe Pork Chop or Zooba or the kitties have a chance this year,” says Parys.

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▶ **IS YOUR PET A STAR?** To learn how to enter his image in the 2010 Spay Day Online Pet Photo Contest and help raise funds for spay/neuter efforts worldwide, visit [humanesociety.org/spayday](http://humanesociety.org/spayday).



### Quoted

“I grew up with animals. In fact, my older sister was a collie named Bonnie,” said actress Wendie Malick. “As kids we were always bringing home wounded and lost creatures. *Old Yeller*, *The Incredible Journey*, *Black Stallion*, *Babe*—all favorites of mine. They reinforced what I already believed: Animals are the greatest teachers and often the most loyal friends you could ever hope for, and they deserve to be treated with dignity and compassion.”



The self-described “animal freak” is known for showing up at rehearsal covered in dog hair. Now sharing her passion with a wider audience, Malick has most recently been seen in HSUS TV spots urging viewers to become heroes for animals. “I have heard from countless people, both friends and strangers, who have vowed to help end the needless suffering of animals in whatever way they can,” she said in an interview with Beverly Kaskey, senior director of The HSUS’s Hollywood Office. “I feel very hopeful about this consciousness.”



## As swine flu reveals, the way we treat animals can have global public health implications

by MICHAEL GREGER, M.D.

**The H1N1 swine flu virus** has infected millions of people and killed thousands, hitting pregnant women and young people particularly hard. But this isn't the first virus that may have arisen from factory farms and, unless these operations start giving animals some breathing room, it may not be the last.

The published genetic fingerprint of the current pandemic virus confirms what scientists already suspected: that its main ancestor is the triple hybrid human/pig/bird flu virus that spread throughout factory farms in the U.S. more than a decade ago.

Until the first detected hybrid virus in North America was found in August 1998 on a factory farm in Sampson County, N.C., the genetic structure of swine flu had remained stable in North America since its emergence in 1918. Sampson County harbors over 2 million pigs—more than any other county in the U.S.; the facility where the virus was first found kept thousands of sows in gestation crates, metal cages so small the pigs couldn't even turn around.

It wouldn't take much to reduce the animal suffering and threats to public health that result from such extreme con-

finement. Measures as simple as straw bedding would alleviate the immune-system-crippling stress of a lifetime spent lying on bare concrete—and have been shown to significantly decrease swine flu transmission rates. But animals are denied even this modicum of mercy, to their detriment and potentially ours as well.

Overcrowding thousands of animals snout to snout in filthy football-field-sized sheds may create a perfect storm environment for the emergence and spread of new "superstrains" of influenza. Besides impaired immune systems of creatures so tightly confined, other factors that make factory farms breeding grounds for disease include the sheer numbers of animals, the millions of gallons of excrement that release lung-burning ammonia, and the lack of adequate fresh air and sunlight. The sun's ultraviolet rays are effective disease-fighters; just 30 minutes of direct sunlight completely inactivates the flu virus. But most pigs never even make it outside until they're trucked to slaughter, and the virus can last for days in the shade and for weeks in moist manure.

The public health community has

warned of the risks posed by factory farms for years. In 2003, the American Public Health Association called for a moratorium on factory farming. In 2005, the United Nations cautioned that live animal markets and massive farm animal production operations "provide ideal conditions for the [flu] virus to spread and mutate into a more dangerous form." Three years later, the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production concluded that industrialized animal agriculture poses "unacceptable" public health risks. The commission's former executive director calls factory farms "super-incubators for viruses."

Recommending that gestation crates be banned, the commission noted that practices "that restrict natural motion, such as sow gestation crates, induce high levels of stress in the animals and threaten their health, which in turn may threaten human health."

There is some good news: Thanks to the efforts of The HSUS and thousands of dedicated volunteers, seven states have already joined the 27 countries of the European Union in phasing out gestation crates. But it's still not enough. Ultimately, we need to phase out the factory farm model for meat, egg, and dairy production.

► **DR. MICHAEL GREGER** is The HSUS's director of public health and animal agriculture.



### ► WEB EXTRAS

- **LEARN** more about the role of factory farming in the emergence and spread of both pig and chicken flu viruses by watching Dr. Greger's *Flu Factories* video.
  - **READ** the full text of Dr. Greger's book *Bird Flu: A Virus of Our Own Hatching*.
  - **LEARN** how to protect pets from swine flu.
- Find it all at [humanesociety.org/magazine](http://humanesociety.org/magazine).

## An Ounce of Common Sense

Factory farming can give rise to human disease—and dilute the cure

**Keeping farm animals indoors** in crowded filth can result in the emergence of superbugs in more ways than one. When factory farming operations give animals antibiotic-laced feed to promote growth and prevent the spread of disease in these stressful, unsanitary conditions, the future effectiveness of the antibiotics is weakened for both people and animals. The doses are low enough that they don't kill all disease-causing bacteria; those that survive generate mutated offspring that are better able to resist antibiotics, including ones that are used to treat human illnesses.

On farms where the animals are raised under better standards—in pastures or in barns with far more room and bedding than is afforded their counterparts in industrial operations—the routine feeding of antibiotics isn't needed for disease prevention. Legislation before Congress could help further the spread of this higher welfare model, in addition to protecting human health, by helping to phase out the routine nontherapeutic use of antibiotics.

The Preservation of Antibiotics for Medical Treatment Act has been introduced in previous sessions, but this time supporters are optimistic about the momentum gathering in their favor. Significantly, top Food and Drug Administration official Dr. Joshua Sharfstein recently shared with a House committee a position no federal agency has voiced in recent years: The use of antimicrobials for “purposes other than for the advancement of animal or human health should not be considered judicious use.” He also acknowledged the problem of overuse in animal agriculture and made a breakthrough request for Congress' help in fixing it.

If passed, PAMTA would go a long way toward pushing agribusiness to stop its profligate misuse of antibiotics. Bon Appétit Management Company chief executive officer Fedele Bauccio testified before the House committee that the café and catering services company currently can't find suppliers in every market that meet its antibiotics standard. “Many producers are afraid to change, even with an economic incentive,” he said. “They need a push. H.R. 1549 could be that lever of change we need.”

—Angela Moxley

### PRESERVATION OF ANTIBIOTICS FOR MEDICAL TREATMENT ACT

**H.R. 1549/S. 619:** Phases out the nontherapeutic use of medically important antibiotics in farm animals, thus encouraging better animal welfare practices.

**SPONSORS:** Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y.; Sens. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., and Olympia Snowe, R-Maine

**HOW TO HELP:** Contact your legislators and ask them to cosponsor the act. To identify your lawmakers, visit [humansociety.org/leglookup](http://humansociety.org/leglookup).

**BILL BOX**



The HSUS's Sára Varsa comforts a sled dog left chained in the wilderness.

## HOT and COLD Relief for Working Dogs

Temperatures that can reach 130 degrees on flight line tarmacs pose a serious problem for working military dogs at Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan. Several dogs succumbed to heat exhaustion last year, and others suffered enteritis, or intestinal inflammation, from eating food spoiled by the heat. In response to a request for help from Army veterinary officer Maj. Donna DeBonis, who oversaw about 100 dogs at the facility, The HSUS and Humane Society International purchased 75 cooling pads and 25 cooling vests at a discounted price from 50 Degree Company. Fedex shipped the items free of charge. The pads and vests hold cold packs that absorb excess body heat, allowing the dogs to work safely for hours. It's not the first time The HSUS and HSI have helped canines beat the heat; the organizations provided cooling vests to U.S. Marine dogs deployed in Iraq in 2003.

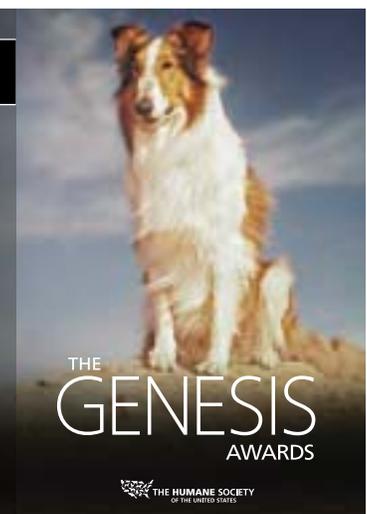
At the other end of the thermostat, The HSUS and HSI Canada teamed up in November with the SPCA Laurentides-Labelle in Quebec to rescue nearly 100 sled dogs chained in the wilderness. The huskies had been left without adequate food and water by a defunct tourist company. The dogs were taken to The HSUS's emergency shelter, where they were treated and vaccinated in preparation for adoption into U.S. and Canadian homes.

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### Name That Dog

Would you like to join Hollywood's most compassionate celebrities in paying tribute to the best in news and entertainment media coverage of animal protection issues?

Vote by March 1 for your favorite canine star and secure a chance to attend The HSUS's 24th Genesis Awards on March 20 in Beverly Hills. Enter at [humansociety.org/genesis](http://humansociety.org/genesis).



## Make Your Voice Heard

**The USDA should remove the financial incentive** for abuse of downed dairy calves by prohibiting the slaughter of these infant animals, who are too weak to stand or walk on their own. The HSUS is pressing the USDA to close an enabling loophole and institute other reforms, including a ban on transport of calves under 10 days old and an overhaul of the federal inspection program for slaughterhouses. Read about the investigation that launched the campaign on page 33, and urge the USDA to adopt the reforms at [humansociety.org/vealpetition](http://humansociety.org/vealpetition). 🐾



The Myriad's Steven Tracy, Jeremy Edwardson, and Randy Miller

## Two-Part Harmony

Students hear music and message of compassion

A popular Christian band recently joined with The HSUS to rock the worlds of the young and the faithful, performing at 25 clubs and universities around the nation.

Part of an initiative to enlist people and institutions of faith in animal protection, the "All Creatures" tour mixed the music of compassion with a showing of *Eating Mercifully*, a short film that exposes the animal abuses inherent to factory farming as antithetical to religious values.

The recipient of an MTV2 breakout artist award, The Myriad headlined shows at Christian universities and joined major-label artist Tyrone Wells at some of his club dates. "To integrate a cause with music is incredibly powerful, because it's a way to reach people on a deeper level, and through people they

admire," says HSUS Faith Outreach program director Christine Gutleben.

Gutleben was impressed by the musicians' conversations with fans about factory farms, puppy mills, and the importance of spaying and neutering of pets. "They really took ownership of the issues," she says. "It became personal for them."

The tour also struck a chord with students, who've begun encouraging university cafeterias to purchase eggs from cage-free operations instead of from those that confine hens in small battery cages where they're virtually immobilized. In the wake of the tour, some professors have even incorporated *Eating Mercifully* into their courses.

In this edited interview, Tyrone Wells and members of The Myriad reflect on how the "All Creatures" tour affected their fans and their own lives.

**Q: How did audiences respond to the message of kindness to animals?**

**Steven Tracy, guitarist, The Myriad:** I think what was most exciting was for people to find out you don't have to go and have petitions signed outside of a grocery store. There are just simple lifestyle choices you can make that are fairly low-impact for your own life, but really make a difference in the bigger picture.

**Tyrone Wells:** For the most part, it felt like an outpouring of solidarity, agreement with the fact that we do need to take care of the animals around us, and we are responsible as human beings.

**Q: What did you learn about animal welfare issues, as a result of doing the tour, that you didn't know before?**

**Randy Miller, drummer, The Myriad:** I didn't know that livestock was treated so poorly—that really bothered me. It's just really disturbing to me, the total disregard for life, so that's what inspired me to dig a little deeper. And it's the same thing with caged hens and the dairy industry; it's all sort of reverting to this machine-like process, and the love of life is getting lost. I used to have chickens—I loved my chickens! And to watch them run around the yard, and to get the eggs, I loved that. I used to say it was therapeutic.

**Steven Tracy:** I consider myself fairly educated on the topic in general, but I think the thing that really hit me is the dairy issue. Not eating meat is one thing, but I'm not able to "unsee" some of the video I've seen of dairy animals really being put in a similar position as cows in the beef industry. I guess once you know it, you're at a crossroads where you can either just sort of shrug it off and decide that it's not worth it, or you can do something.

**Q: How does the message of compassion for animals fit in with your faith?**

**Jeremy Edwardson, singer, The Myriad:** I believe God created this world and gave us a responsibility to take care of it as best we can. I don't think God intended for us to lock up animals so tightly they cannot move around, to take away their basic quality of life, to withhold the soil from their feet and the sun from their backs, to pump them full of steroids until their bones bend and break. I just don't think God smiles upon this and says, 'Yes, this is good.' This doesn't seem right from a Christian perspective, or any other perspective, in my opinion.

— Jim Baker

➤ Though the "All Creatures" tour was designed for young Christian audiences, The HSUS engages leaders from many religions. Most recently, Faith Outreach director Christine Gutleben has worked with prominent rabbis to urge IHOP to switch to cage-free eggs. Learn more and watch *Eating Mercifully* at [humansociety.org/religion](http://humansociety.org/religion).