



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: In July, the U.S. Forest Service, The HSUS, and other NGOs relocated three black-tailed prairie dog colonies further into Wyoming’s Thunder Basin National Grassland, where they will be protected from poisoning. Along with humane trapping, the team flushed prairie dogs from their burrows with soapy water transported in tanks.

The trapping and flushing techniques worked despite the prairie dogs’ skittishness from being regularly shot at by locals.

Kristy Bly with World Wildlife Fund-U.S. releases a prairie dog into a nest cap set over a previously plagued-out burrow system, the first step into his new home.

In his version of a yoga sun salutation, a prairie dog jump yips atop his burrow.

The HSUS’s Dave Pauli works the prairie dog assembly line as the animals are scooped up from their burrows. “You see these guys come up and it’s just suds in the shape of a prairie dog,” Milani says.

PRAIRIE DOG WATCH

**AN HSUS PHOTOGRAPHER REFLECTS ON
JUMP YIPS, PRAIRIE LIFE—AND PROTECTING
A NATIVE SPECIES FROM POISONING**

text and photos by KATHY MILANI

I'd been watching the prairie dogs for hours as they nibbled on grasses, ran between burrows, touched noses and kissed. The evening light was perfect for photos—golden prairie, sandstone bluffs, and miles of pale blue sky. The stillness calmed my spirit as I sat in the middle of the colony, wearing clothes that blended with the landscape, my camera set low to the ground on a tripod. Not another human soul was around for miles.

When I'd first arrived, the colony's sentinels had promptly sounded their alarm chirps. But after realizing I posed no threat, the prairie dogs let loose with jump yips—joyful cries and snappy stretches to the sky. And when they allowed me to sit among them, I felt they had accepted me. Soon I was watching them jump yip when they first emerged in the morning and at night before they settled into their burrows. One day, the entire colony joined one after another in the spectacle, like waves of fans at a baseball game.

Last summer, this colony and one other were moved deeper into Wyoming's 583,000-acre Thunder Basin National Grassland; a nearby landowner wanted them gone, and the alternative was poisoning. This summer, I was there to photograph the flourishing colonies and a second relocation effort under way, coordinated by The HSUS in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and other NGOs. Three more colonies deemed too close to private lands were in jeopardy of being poisoned.



CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT: Prairie dog, pronghorn, and fence demonstrate the grassland's controversial issues. The fence demarcates the boundary between public and private land—a concept not understood by wildlife.

The HSUS's Lindsey Sterling Krank moves a prairie dog into a nest cap over his new burrow. "It's like, 'We've done it! This prairie dog will be protected,'" says Milani.

After a few days in their new home, the resilient prairie dogs explored and groomed and kissed one another. "They had different personalities," Milani says. "Some were more touchy-feely with each other. But they were always looking out for each other."

Prairie Dog Action's Deb Jones squirts saline into the animals' eyes to flush out the soapy water.



As I sat with the prairie dogs, I thought about how they'd had to be relocated simply because surrounding landowners couldn't share this wide expanse of prairie. Many of the ranchers want this critical species gone, even from the 18,000 acres of federally protected grassland where the U.S. Forest Service is trying to grow its population for the reintroduction of the black-footed ferret, an endangered species that depends on prairie dogs for food. A local guy stopped me one morning as I was getting my gear together. He hated prairie dogs and was upset that his tax dollars were being spent on relocating "vermin." But tax dollars are also spent on poisoning. I asked him if he'd ever sat down in the middle of a field and just observed prairie dogs, if he'd even noticed their jump yips. He said he hadn't.

This kind of hatred deeply troubles me. In rural areas, so many issues with wild animals derive from unfounded claims that they compete with livestock for grass. In urban areas throughout prairie dogs' range, it's development that shrinks their habitat.

As the sun dipped behind the horizon, I suddenly heard the prairie dogs sounding their alarm calls. I knew it wasn't because of me; I'd been there for some time. I squinted toward the distance and saw three badgers stalking toward the colony. It was a long, tense moment as the predators closed in, hesitated—and then disappeared beyond the horizon. The prairie dogs quieted until about 20 minutes later, when their sharp chirps pierced the silence. The badgers had come back: one, two, three shadowy figures lumbering one after another where grass meets sky.

Again the badgers disappeared—perhaps deterred by my presence—and this time the colony seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. I certainly did. Then the pronghorn came, and I knew that I was part of this extraordinary place. I'd been the prairie dogs' sentinel that night. And this became one of my favorite spots on earth.

HSUS photographer Kathy Milani recounted her prairie dog tales to *All Animals* staff writer Ruthanne Johnson. To view a slideshow with more photos—and to watch an interview with prairie dog advocate Ted Turner—go to humanesociety.org/allanimals.



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