

## **Canadian Prairie Dog Ecosystem Research Project**

### **Volunteer Opportunity**

Parks Canada and the Calgary Zoo have partnered in the recovery of black-footed ferrets and the management of black-tailed prairie dogs since 2004, with the Calgary Zoo commencing field work in 2007. The primary objective of this partnership is for the Calgary Zoo to use its scientific and communications/outreach expertise and capacity to work collaboratively with Parks Canada to incorporate scientific research into conservation actions and to inspire Canadians to value Canada's only Prairie Dog Ecosystem. Furthermore, the Calgary Zoo uses their expertise in species reintroductions to collaboratively further the process and increase the success of ferret recovery in Canada.

#### **Who:**

Grasslands National Park in partnership with the Calgary Zoo are looking for volunteers willing to participate in field research for the Canadian Prairie Dog Ecosystem Research Project.

Space is limited and will be filled with qualified applicants on a first come first serve basis. We will only be able to accommodate two volunteers for each time period.

#### **What:**

Fieldwork will involve primarily conducting visual counts of black-tailed prairie dogs on colonies in the West Block of Grasslands National Park. Once visual counts are completed (mornings), volunteers may also participate in burrow swabbing, burrow transects, and vegetation sampling, and may be able to observe or live-trapping of black-tailed prairie dogs, depending on scheduling constraints.

As our field work is heavily dependent on the weather, the schedule of specific field activities will be determined on a daily basis. Field activities are limited on rainy or cold days and will likely be replaced with motion sensor camera maintenance and sorting photographs.

#### **Why:**

Black-footed ferret reintroductions began in Grasslands National Park in 2009. They are a specialist predator of black-tailed prairie dogs, a highly social and colonial keystone rodent. Two of the biggest threats to the recovery of black-footed ferrets in Canada are sylvatic plague (to which both black-footed ferrets and black-tailed prairie dogs are highly susceptible) and availability of prairie dogs as prey. In addition to plague, a potential limiting factor black-tailed prairie dog populations is availability of forage. The research conducted by this volunteer program will contribute to learning about the

distribution and abundance of fleas (burrow swabbing for fleas, which are the vector for sylvatic plague), prairie dog population density and pup production (visual counts and burrow counts) and prairie dog habitat quality and availability of forage (vegetation sampling). All of these research activities will contribute to better understanding the drivers of population dynamics of black-tailed prairie dogs, contributing to making strides in the recovery of this predator - prey system in Canada.

**When:**

Volunteers are needed for the following times:

- June 7-13
- June 14-20
- June 21-27
- August 18-23
- August 25-30
- September 8-13

We will only be able to accommodate a maximum of five volunteers for the first (June 7-13) and second (June 14-20) week, and two volunteers all other weeks.

Weeks in June – Please plan to arrive in Val Marie for orientation on Friday afternoon/evening (specific time TBD), and to be in the field from Saturday-Thursday.

Weeks in August and September – Please plan to arrive in Val Marie for orientation on Sunday afternoon/evening (specific time TBD), and to be in the field from Monday-Friday.

**Comments from Past Volunteers:**

“It’s an experience I would recommend to anyone with an interest in nature or the prairies.”

“I always felt as though my work was valued. The members of the group were so gracious towards the volunteers and constantly thanked us for our help. The work given to me made me feel as though I was a valued member of the team”

“It’s hard to explain how privileged I felt joining you guys. It is so different to actually DO something rather than read about how it was done. It gives an entirely new appreciation of the park and how precious it is.”