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*Killing Prairie Dogs in
Oklahoma*

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The Prairie Dog at Home

Killing Prairie Dogs in Oklahoma

By B. J. MELTON.

In the early days prairie dogs infested large areas of western Oklahoma, extending as far east as Osage, McClain, and Carter counties, and west to the State line, and beyond. The early settler frequently had to poison out the prairie dogs in order to raise a crop at all, his field sometimes being in the center of a prairie dog "town". These early efforts met with considerable success, owing to the fact that prairie dogs at that time had developed no suspicion against poisoned baits placed temptingly before them. While large numbers of prairie dogs were thus killed, the work was not carried on to complete extermination, so that today we have practically the same part of Oklahoma from Osage, McClain and Carter counties west infested with prairie dogs, but not to so great an extent as in earlier years. The problem now confronting us is to make a clean-up on the prairie dogs left in the State.

The prairie dogs of today are descended from those of the earlier times that were wise enough to avoid man's attempts to exterminate them. The result is that the animals we have to combat are generally harder to poison than those of previous years. Early settlers tell of having poisoned prairie dogs with grain soaked in strychnine sulphate dissolved in hot water. Such a preparation is intensely bitter, and to try to poison prairie dogs by such a crude method today would be utter folly. The present situation calls for the application of improved methods and persistent and concerted effort if we are to rid the State of the pests.



Poisoned Grain

There are now in Oklahoma about 400,000 acres actually infested with prairie dogs. Were nothing further done toward controlling the pests the area infested would be steadily extended and the situation would become increasingly serious. Reports received from farmers in Oklahoma during the past two years indicate that the average damage per year from prairie dogs is \$2.00 per acre for acres actually infested. From this it will be seen that the yearly loss from these pests to farmers in the State amounts to about \$800,000.00.

The amount of damage done by any prairie dog colony depends upon the location of their town. When living adjacent to a cultivated field of any kind, the prairie dogs will cut the stalks off close to the ground, destroying several times as much as they eat. Their object, apparently, is to clear an area large enough to prevent an enemy from approaching unnoticed. In pasture land the damage done does not represent so great a loss, but is estimated to be at least half the value of the grass produced.

METHODS OF KILLING PRAIRIE DOGS

Various methods are employed for killing prairie dogs, but the two in most common use are poisoning the animals and fumigating their burrows with a poisonous gas. The former is accomplished by offering the prairie dogs a poisoned bait, usually grain coated with strychnine. The fumigant generally used is carbon bisulphide.

Other methods of combating prairie dogs include trapping, shooting, and the protection of their natural enemies. Trapping and shooting are effective but are too slow to be practicable where there is a large area to be cleared. In some instances, when other methods fail, it is necessary to resort to trapping before the last animal can be killed.

The protection of the natural enemies of the prairie dogs will pay a larger return



Ready To Distribute Poisoned Grain

than one would ordinarily suppose. Snakes, hawks, owls, badgers, and coyotes are persistent feeders on prairie dogs and keep their numbers down. No one advocates the protection of coyotes in Oklahoma, however, but the other animals named are more beneficial than harmful and will continue to be so as long as harmful rodents are numerous.

POISONING

Farmers are not advised to attempt to mix their own poison, as there is a much greater possibility of accident than when the grain is procured already prepared. Again, the strychnine called for is so much more expensive when purchased in small quantities that it increases the cost. The baits are not easily mixed in smaller quantities than those indicated. Grain prepared by the following formula may be purchased from the Experiment Station at Stillwater, or from the County Clerk at the county seat in most counties in western Oklahoma:

Wet 10 ounces of common laundry starch with 1 pint of cold water and mix until the lumps are all broken up. Pour over this 1 gallon of *boiling* water, stirring briskly to prevent lumps forming as the starch cooks.

To this starch solution add the following: One pound of common baking soda, which has been wet with 1 pint of warm water and mix until lumps are eliminated; 15 ounces of STRYCHNINE ALKALOID POWDERED, wet with 1½ pints of warm water and mixed to an even consistency; 2 quarts of a heavy corn sirup; and 1 ounce of saccharin dissolved in a glass of hot water.

Stir until the ingredients are thoroughly mixed, and then pour over 240 quarts (7½ bushels) of clean grain and stir with a shovel until each grain is evenly coated. Particular care should be given to the mixing to BE SURE THAT GRAIN IS EVENLY COATED. Poor mixing will invariably result in poor results from the poisoning operations.

The best grain to use for poisoning prairie dogs is oats. When oats are not obtainable, feterita, milo, or kafir may be used, preference being given to the grains in the order named. If the area to be treated has been previously treated with poison, a different kind of grain should by all means be used for the second treatment. Use the best quality of grain obtainable. Results will justify having it cleaned.

One quart of this poisoned grain is sufficient to treat from 35 to 40 prairie dog holes, and the number of acres that can be treated with a given quantity will naturally depend upon the number of holes per acre.

The area to be treated should first be baited with clean grain of the same kind as that which is poisoned, the grain being scattered on a clean spot on the ground near each mound. Using about one tablespoonful to each hole, the grain should cover about one square foot of surface. There are two great advantages in this: It will require just as much poisoned bait as it does unpoisoned grain, so that the amount of poisoned bait needed can be determined to a certainty. The greatest advantage, however, is that after the prairie dogs have eaten the unpoisoned grain, they much more readily take and eat the poisoned bait. Thus a larger proportion of the animals may be killed with one treatment.

Do not put out the poisoned bait until the clean grain has been eaten, which will be in about two days, and do not place it in the holes. With reasonable care in scattering the bait, livestock will not be endangered. These methods have been thoroughly tested and the instructions given should be followed closely.

It is the general opinion that prairie dog poisoning cannot be successfully



Distributing Prairie Dog Poison



Dead Prairie Dogs

accomplished except in the winter and early spring months before there is any green vegetation. It has been proved, however, that the method herein given will prove successful at any time of the year, if the weather is fair. Better results are obtained during the first six months of the year than during the last six, but the difference in the results is not sufficient to warrant putting off the poisoning for a more favorable season. It will pay a farmer to poison prairie dogs regardless of season.

CAUTION—Keep poisoned grain out of the reach of children, irresponsible persons, domestic animals and fowls.

One treatment with poisoned grain applied according to the above instructions, if the weather conditions are favorable, will result in killing a large part of the prairie dogs. If the original area was large, it will probably be well to treat it a second time, following the same instructions, but using a different grain. Ordinarily this is not recommended, for the small number of prairie dogs left can be more effectively exterminated by fumigation.

FUMIGATING BURROWS

Carbon bisulphide is the best fumigant for destroying prairie dogs. There are a number of gas preparations patented and on the market that are claimed to be highly efficient in killing all kinds of burrowing rodents. Many of these fumigants must be ignited, however, before they will give off a gas. This is very unsatisfactory for the purpose at hand, since there is danger of spreading prairie fire from matches and additional work is involved, the cost of application being increased thereby. These preparations generally cost more than carbon bisulphide and for this added reason they are not recommended when the latter can be obtained. Carbon bisulphide should be used as follows:

Place 32 partly opened cotton bolls or horse droppings in a 1-gallon friction-top bucket and pour over them 1 quart of carbon bisulphide. Turn the bucket over and back several times to make sure that each ball is thoroughly and evenly saturated. Roll one ball down each live hole and immediately close the opening with fresh dirt. Igniting or exploding the carbon bisulphide will not increase the kill materially and will only add the danger of fire or other accident.

Fumigating may be a little more sure than using only poisoned grain, but it is more expensive and the work required is much greater. It pays to use the poisoned grain first, following this by treating the few remaining live holes with carbon bisulphide. By all means follow up the work until the last prairie dog is killed, and encourage your neighbors to do the same. Please report results to the Agricultural and Mechanical College at Stillwater.

CAUTION—Carbon bisulphide is highly explosive. Keep it away from fire.

