

Gophers spend most of time underground



PHOTO COURTESY OF PAM ASHETON

A gopher with cheeks packed with the latest groceries from a shopping trip.



Pam Asheton Listening to the Land

Two years back they were out on Feb. 16. This year one brave young male warrior popped out during a briefly sunny morning Mar. 11. A few blizzards swept through (again) and not one brave soul has ventured out until last Sunday (Apr. 6) on the southwest facing rough fescued hillsides.

Gophers, technically Richardson's ground squirrels, stayed firmly underground very late indeed this year. Ranchers and acreage owners who have acres of useless water-guzzling Kentucky blue grass are convinced each spring and summer their fields and lawns are in danger of complete takeover. Nothing is further away from the truth.

Of first-year litters over 95 per cent of those populations

perish, according to scientific research. Mrs. Ground Squirrel has sex one perfect time, one ideal afternoon, each year, and that's that - absolute researched fact.

Amazing, eh?

Ground squirrels figure as an invaluable part of prairie foothills eco-systems. They feed eagles, hawks, badgers, coyotes, wolves, weasels and foxes as part of those predators' diet and nabbing one, if you've ever watched over an entire summer, takes considerable skill.

Their whistles (you may think you're listening to bird calls as the whistle flutes up and down across the meadows) warn other nearby families above ground very precisely of predators lurking, often with one standing bolt upright as the sentry lookout.

They're family-minded, very good mothering skills and are brave in standing up to attacking predators if they have to - although the preferred escapism is a quick tango and bounce down into networked tunnels.

A huge part of their lives, perhaps three-quarters of each year,

is underground. With August's hot weathers, they're back down again, hunkered into grass-lined burrowed 'rooms', seed store-rooms nearby. Their internal water absorption is a unique adaptation of Alberta's drought to flood irregular weather systems - every bit of dew atop a grass blade will be sucked into their bodies - the dung (or scat) is hard and dry and there's not a drop of spare moisture there.

Males, more adventurous travelers, have shorter lifespans, roughly two years or so on average. One young female who came into the old farmhouse's kitchen here, sipping from the cats' bowls desperate for re-hydrating water after a hawk attack that ripped open her shoulders and back, visited over four summers and charmed many visitors.

Her photograph here has her cheeks packed with grasses and seeds; a biologist recorded one ground squirrel was found with over 1,500 different seed varieties packed in while out grocery shopping.

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