



Colonies of swift foxes live, play and hunt on ranch land



PAPA FOX (top photo) watched from behind a clump of grass before resuming his hunt. At least five kits were visible in the photo above, though eventually all nine came out to play.

Foxes prey on prairie dogs

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Larry Haverfield's prairie dogs may not have earned him many friends among his neighbors, but the Logan County rancher is just stubborn and independent enough not to care much about that.

There are a couple of constituencies that think the prairie dogs are just fine, though.

Tasty even. Haverfield would get their vote every time: The black-footed ferrets planted by federal wildlife officials, and the colonies of swift foxes that inhabit his ranch south of Russell Springs.

The ranch sprawls across several sections along Butte Creek, south of the Smoky Hill River, the short grass lush and green after generous spring and summer rains.

We were lucky enough to get a tour of the ranch earlier this summer and hear Mr. Haverfield explain the "cellular" intensive grazing system he uses to increase the carrying capacity of his pasture.

After the tour, we drove to the

nearest fox colony, about a mile from the ranch house, for an evening show. Larry says three adults and nine kits are living in the dens among a prairie dog colony.

As we drove up, though, the kits quickly disappeared. One adult—not knowing for sure, we assumed it was the father fox—was out front, near where we parked. Another stayed atop the farthest foxhole—and we figured her for momma fox. While the kits were sleek, orange where their more common cousins are red, the adults were still shedding their wintercoats. The molting winterfur, tinged with black and grey, seemed to hang in clumps on their flanks.

The male near us made no move to run away. He stayed crouched down, then as we remained quiet, resumed his hunting.

It's hard to imagine how low a fox can slink in five-inch short grass. His elbows were above his shoulders as he moved from clump to clump. He seemed to be working his way northwest, toward a group of prairie dog holes.

Meantime, the kits were begin-

ning to return to the surface. First we counted one, then two, then another at the closest hole. Then a couple by the back hole, where momma stood watch. And then a couple by the left hole of three apparently interconnected burrows, which looked like maybe the prairie dogs had started the construction and the foxes had finished it.

Little heads kept appearing until all nine kits had come to the surface, even the smallest one, the runt, who appeared a little misshapen, but got around quite well, thank you, and spent his time pestering his bigger siblings. And like a litter of puppies or kittens, the kits began to wrestle, nip, jump and carouse.

It was already quite a show when an alarm went up from the prairie dogs behind us, and papa fox came running back into camp with a prairie dog in his mouth. He'd made his kill 180 degrees from the direction he'd left, going out to the northwest and striking to the southeast.

As one, all the foxes were up, running around, chasing each other, celebrating the kill. Papa took it

underground, where presumably he had his fill before sharing.

That didn't dampen the celebration up above one bit.

Later, over burgers ground from the Haverfields' grass-fed beef, we talked about the wildlife we'd seen—hawks and prairie dogs, foxes, birds of all kinds—and how they all fit together on the prairie. The prairie dogs are just part of the system God put there, Larry says, and he's not the one to run them off.

Even his friends think he might be a little crazy, but the way his grazing system works, he probably can afford the prairie dogs.

After the sun set on Lone Butte, we started back to town. We didn't wait around for the black-footed ferrets—they come out in the pre-dawn hours—but we'd seen quite a show already.

"They don't perform like that every day," Betty Haverfield said.

And to see it, capping a beautiful day on the range, was a privilege.



ONE OF THE KITS (above) peered around some grass to see what the visitors were up to. Papa fox (below left) was slinking out to hunt prairie dogs (below right), and wound up circling way around behind our truck.

— Herald staff photos by Cynthia Haynes

