

Pesky gophers on city's hit list

Ground squirrels only one of the destructive animals the city has to control

By **DELON SHURTZ**

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Don't get the wrong idea. City parks employees aren't dressed in flak jackets or metal helmets and they're not running around with machine guns trying to rid the city of some of its worst enemies, namely Richardson's ground squirrels.

"We don't just go out and assault ground squirrels and declare war on them," says Ron Tinordi, parks foreman for the city.

But trying to stem the tide of hundreds of thousands of ground squirrels — commonly called gophers — is a never-ending battle, admits Kevin Jensen, public operations co-ordinator.

"We're trying the best we can to manage the pests in a way that's humane and not cruel," Jensen says.

But many Lethbridge residents don't always see it that way. Some believe it's cruel and inhumane to kill gophers and the furry rodents should just be left alone.

The city attempts to interfere as little as possible with Mother Nature's fragile ecosystem. But without a pest management program, which covers ground squirrels, beaver, Canada Geese, porcupine, deer and insects, the city would soon be overrun.

In its fight to control gopher populations, the city focuses on areas where they — or the ankle-breaking holes they make — can be



HERALD PHOTO BY ROB OLSON

MARKED FOR ELIMINATION: A Richardson's ground squirrel surveys its territory before leaving the safety of its burrow.

hazardous to people. That includes parks, walkways, playgrounds, sports fields and Fort Whoop-Up, where both people and horses congregate.

In other areas of the river bottom, such as around Helen Schuler Coulee Centre, the city actually encourages the ground squirrel.

The city has used several techniques over the years to control the rodents. Strychnine made way for the anticoagulant chlorophacinone, which was supposed to painlessly cause gophers to internally bleed to death. Jensen wasn't convinced the chemical was painless so the city stopped using it.

Gopher bombs, which release sulfur dioxide into gopher tunnels, were tried as was an explosive mixture of propane and oxygen. The city even resorted to the "drown and pound" technique — the term is self-explanatory — but none were deemed particularly humane.

Finally the city discovered a relatively simple and effective process of venting carbon monoxide into burrows, which put gophers into a deadly, yet painless, sleep.

"It seemed the most humane method," Tinordi says.

And necessary.

Stepping into a gopher hole while playing soccer is a sure-fire way to break an ankle or leg. And it wouldn't do for a horse to step into a hole while performing with the RCMP Musical Ride at Fort Whoop-Up.

"We have a responsibility as a city to provide a safe environment," Tinordi says.

If the population was allowed to explode, the city could be on the hook for any accidents which occurred in public areas.

"Our liability would go through the roof," Jensen says.

Although the city's pest management program extends beyond gophers, it usually simply traps and relocates other problem animals such as beavers and porcupines.

It has also attempted to cut back on the amount of chemicals used on trees and green strips.

Any Questions? Contact the writer at delon.shurtz@lethbridgeherald.com.