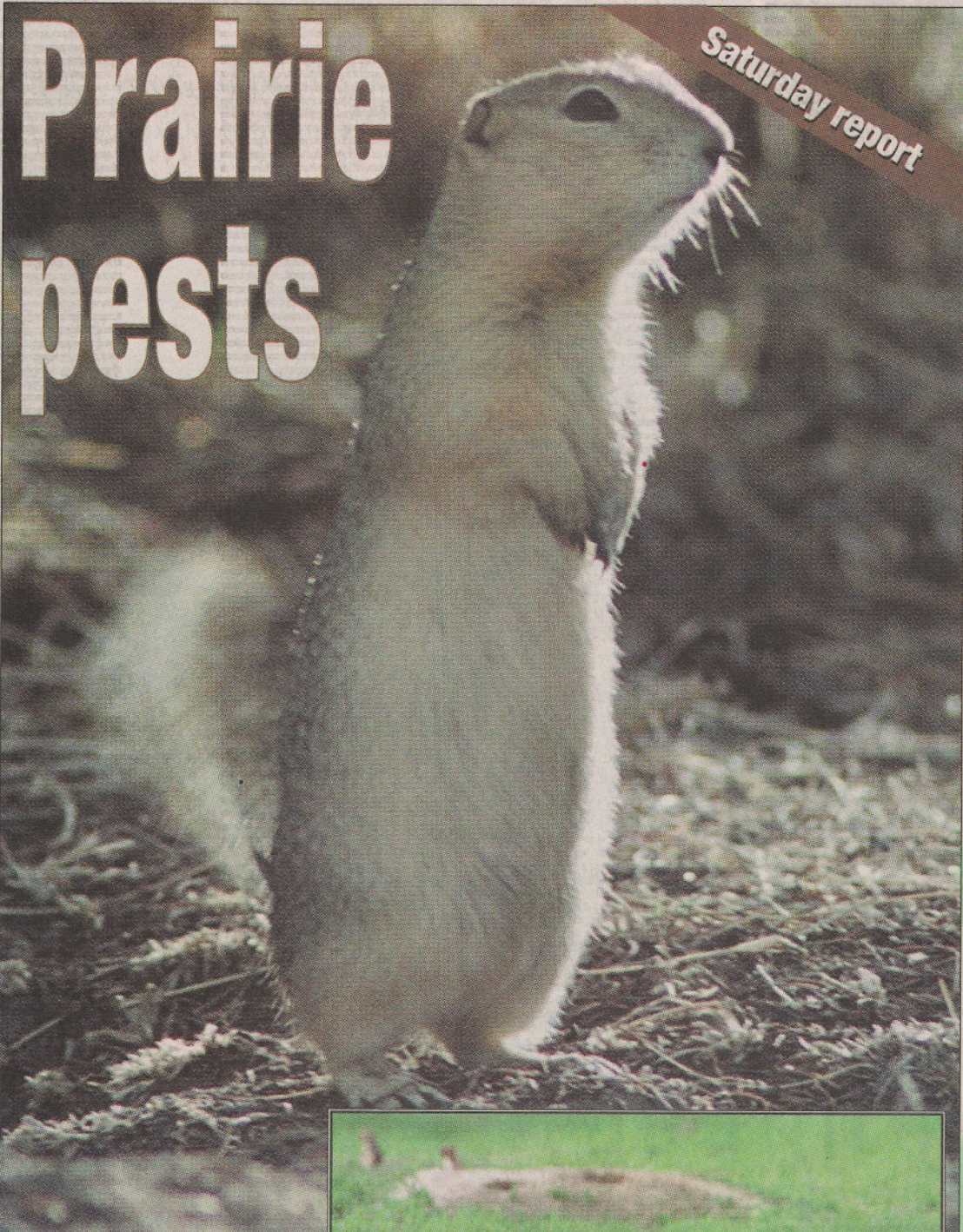


Prairie pests

Saturday report



Photos by RANDY FIEDLER,
JEFF STOKOE/Advocate staff

**Richardson ground
squirrels, commonly known
as gophers, are creating
havoc on local farms**



Farmers struggle with crops, equipment damaged by Richardson ground squirrels

By PAUL COWLEY
Advocate staff

Ground squirrels have clawed their way to the top of many Central Alberta farmers' "most wanted" lists.

Ask Innisfail-area farmer Penny Archibald if she's had any sightings and you get a laugh. "Seen them. They're taking over.

"I've never seen as many as we've seen this year. And we've got people here every week shooting them."

Commonly called gophers, the ground squirrels have become public enemy No. 1 for many landowners.

Archibald said poisons aren't working, including a strychnine solution the Alberta government allowed many municipalities to sell earlier this summer.

"I bought two gallons. It might have slowed them down a bit."

Archibald, who is a Red Deer County councillor, believes the government should allow farmers to use a stronger strychnine solution.

Or at least the poison should have been available to farmers in early spring when there was snow on the ground and the gophers were more likely to feed on the bait.

This summer their tell-tale holes booby-trapped fields, trip up cattle and mangle disk cultivators.

Archibald said a field across the road from her is already on its way to being devastated by the burrowing critters.

"They're going to take 75 per cent of the crop in that one. It was a newly planted hay field."

Archibald measures the havoc on her fields in acres. By rough estimates, she figures to lose five acres of a 45-acre wheat crop, another nine acres in a 70-acre hay field and five acres out of 50 acres of barley.

Hay fields stunted by a poor spring are ideal for gophers.

"They don't like a crop that gets really high. The hay is so stunted they go crazy in that."

Adding to farmers' problems are the badgers who have a taste for the ground squirrels. While badgers eat the squirrels, they also dig large deep holes, which can break a cow's leg or snap the wheel of a tractor.

"Things have got ridiculous," said Allan Archibald. "It's not like we haven't tried and tried and tried.

"Our land is just being destroyed."

The problem is worse for farmers who have adopted low-tillage practices and other soil-conservation techniques, he said.

"It's the conservation method of farming that makes it easier for things to get rampant like this."

Regular farming keeps squirrel populations down because the soil is disturbed a lot more often. The fertilizers used in deep cultivation also get down into the squirrels' holes, driving them out.

"It will stop you from doing conservation farming is what it's going to do. The ground squirrels are going to keep me from going any further with it."

Deb Lowry, who farms with husband Dale about 400 acres 10 km east of Innisfail, is also having problems.

"They're extremely bad. The badgers have moved in and the badgers have made a gigantic hole.

"It's pretty tough on our hay equipment if we get any hay."

The holes are so bad that working the fields must be done slowly so equipment isn't beaten to pieces.

"Bouncing around in the truck you just about need a kidney belt."

Deb Lowry said squirrel populations seem to have been building over the last four years.

"This is the worst I've seen it in 15 years," she said.

Going back to a stronger poison may be a solution.

"(But) we're concerned about the effect on other wildlife. We don't want to see that go."

The last thing farmers want to see is the creation of a "killing circle" — an area around poisoned bait where species up the food chain succumb to a poison targeted at a single pest.

John Bourne, an Alberta Agriculture vertebrate pest specialist, said ground squirrels are regular residents of Alberta farms from the Athabasca River south.

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