



CP PHOTO

DWINDLING NUMBERS: Irene Wilson spruces up one of the stars of the Gopher Hole Museum in Torrington, Alta. The ubiquitous symbol of the prairies is becoming sparse in some regions.

'Virtually indestructible' gopher fading from prairie landscape

Scientists search for reasons as species fluctuate

EDMONTON (CP) — George Landis has spent much of his 81 years riding the wide-open ranges of southern Saskatchewan and Alberta.

So when he recently visited the coulees and pastures of the southeastern Alberta ranch now run by his son, he could tell something was missing.

The Richardson's ground squirrel, the so-called gopher familiar from prairie roadsides everywhere, was nowhere to be found.

"I thought they were virtually indestructible, until now," he says.

Ground squirrels remain common in many areas. But naturalists have reported similar drops between Kindersley and Saskatoon over the past few

years.

On the grasslands border of Montana and Saskatchewan, provincial biologist Wayne Harris can't remember when there were so few squirrels.

Antelope, Swainson's and ferruginous hawks, and various reptile and fish populations are all in a precipitous freefall.

At the same time, researchers are just as perplexed by the sudden bloom of voles, deer mice, coyotes and red fox, and the emergence of some prairie insects that haven't been seen since the 1940s.

Burrowing owls on the Regina plain declined to an all-time low of just 35 pairs, says Geoff Holroyd of the Canadian Wildlife Service.

But biologists have never counted so many on the badlands of South Dakota.

Prairie species have always been affected by alternating droughts and rains. But the current population swings have scientists baffled, and some worry

the prairie ecosystem is in danger of collapse.

"If I knew why any of this was happening, I'd tell you," says Agriculture Canada scientist Dan Johnson.

"But the fact is there are so many factors at play in the prairie ecosystem and so few people studying it that it is virtually impossible to provide a lot of explanations."

The widespread use of pesticides is thought responsible for a severe decline in the numbers of prairie songbirds and birds of prey. Although pesticides are now tightly regulated in Canada, about 4,000 Swainson's hawks were found dead in Argentina in 1995, victims of pesticide.

Land use is also a factor, says University of Alberta zoologist Wayne Roberts.

"Drain as many wetlands and dam as many prairie rivers as we have over the past half-century, and you are bound to have changed the hydrology of the

prairie ecosystem. Something has to give."

Only about 1 per cent of the grasslands, and 13 per cent of the original Canadian prairie, is not being tilled, lived or golfed on, making it Canada's second-most endangered ecosystem next to the Carolinian forest of southern Ontario.

Biologist Joe Schmutz believes some of the changes are related to climate.

At least one study suggests spring has been arriving on average about a week earlier over the past 40 years.

If that is so, and if winters are also getting warmer, Schmutz says it may be that ground squirrels aren't getting the cold ground temperatures they need to trigger hibernation.

If they don't hibernate, it's tough for them to get through the winter. And that makes it tough for the many plants, insects and animals that depend on the squirrel.