

Weber, D.A. 2004. Winter raptor use of prairie dog towns in the Denver, Colorado vicinity. Pp. 195-199. *In*: Shaw, et al. (eds.) Proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Urban Wildlife Symposium.

Abstract: The Denver, Colorado metropolitan area is one of the fastest growing areas in the United States. Rapid development is destroying wildlife habitat, and the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) is attempting to deal with the situation. A large number of black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) towns exist around the urbanized area, but are rapidly being destroyed. CDOW biologists noted that prairie dog towns in the north metro area appeared to be receiving heavy use during the winter months by feeding raptors, mainly bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), ferruginous hawks (*Buteo regalis*), and red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*). The CDOW decided to document the winter raptor/prairie dog connection by gathering specific information on raptor use of prairie dog towns. In the winters of 1994 (12 towns), 1995 (15 towns), and 1996 (38 towns) raptor use of selected prairie dog towns was monitored by observers viewing each town for 15-minute intervals. Also recorded was the acreage, number of active burrows, number of available perches and a description of adjacent land uses. Prairie dog towns received high use by hunting raptors all 3 years of the study: 1994 - 6.6 raptors/hour, 1995 - 5.7 raptors/hour, and 1996 - 4.2 raptors/hour. We felt that these levels of use represented very high raptor reliance on prairie dogs. Four species of raptors were most commonly observed: ferruginous hawks 39.1%, red-tailed hawks 22.5%, bald eagles 15.3%, golden eagles 6.4%, and other/unidentified 16.7%. There was high variability in raptor use from one town to the next, ranging from a high of 12.0/hour to a low of 0.5/hour. Three possible reasons for the variable use were investigated: 1) number of prairie dogs in the town; 2) availability of hunting perches; and 3) surrounding land use. Raptor use was closely correlated with the number of active prairie dogs in a town, the more prairie dogs the more raptors. Availability of perch sites appeared to be a positive factor in encouraging raptor use, but the data were not conclusive. The amount of urbanization adjacent to the town did not appear to be correlated with raptor use. Many raptors readily hunted prairie dogs close to heavy urbanization. The CDOW is using this information as the main justification for implementing an initiative to attempt to save or replace prairie dog towns being lost to development as Denver expands.