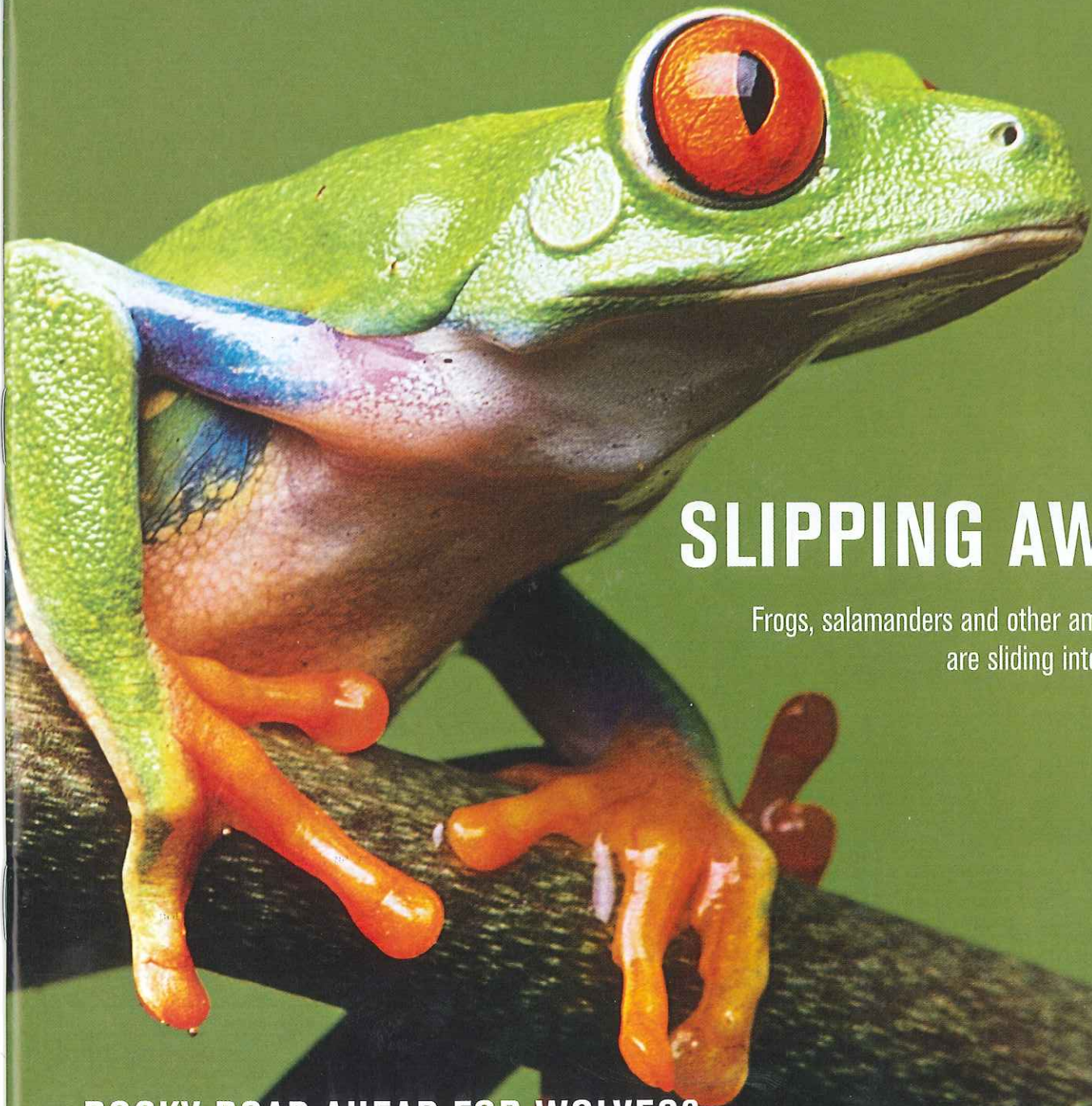


Defenders

THE CONSERVATION MAGAZINE OF DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE



SLIPPING AWAY

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**ROCKY ROAD AHEAD FOR WOLVES?
LOONS ON THE LINE**

SPRING
2008

There's No Place Like A Home in Kansas for Prairie Dogs

By Ted Cable



Eight miles south of Russell Springs in west-central Kansas's Logan County is an island of short-grass prairie teeming with wildlife, a spot where ranchers Larry and Bette Haverfield have found themselves in the middle of a dog fight—a prairie dog fight, to be exact.

These 70-something, third-generation Kansans have been successfully grazing cattle here for 60 years. But unlike some ranchers in their state, who dislike prairie dogs because they think the small, burrowing, grass-eating animals compete with cattle for grass, the Haverfields understand that prairie dog colonies enhance grasslands by rotating minerals in the soil and by providing homes and food for other creatures, such as the federally endangered black-footed ferret.

Logan County officials want to poison the prairie dogs—even those that reside on private property. When the couple refused to kill the prairie dogs on the 10,000 acres of land they own and lease, the county

took them to court. "Everybody supports property rights so long as they agree with what you are doing on your land," says Bette Haverfield.

The response of the county commissioners—and many of their neighbors—has been particularly surprising. Previously, keeping government off private land and out of landowners' affairs has been a hallmark of those now touting this government-forced poisoning. "It's a property-rights case in the reverse," says Defenders of Wildlife's Jonathan Proctor. Proctor, based in neighboring Colorado, leads Defenders' campaign to help reintroduce endangered black-footed ferrets to the High Plains. He became involved with the Haverfields and their fight in 2006, because the ferrets' fate is directly tied to the welfare of prairie dogs in places such as Logan County.

Black-footed ferrets—masked, two-foot-long members of the weasel family—have been listed as endangered under the

Endangered Species Act since 1968 and were once thought extinct. But a small population was discovered in Wyoming in 1981, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service launched a captive-breeding and reintroduction program. The service's goal is to have ferret populations at 10 or more wide-spread locations, each with at least 30 breeding adults and all totaling at least 1,500. A successful population in Logan County is now a part of this effort. But to survive, ferrets need prairie dog prey. They also need places to live, and their dwelling of choice is prairie dog burrows. But with the conversion of grasslands to cropland and government-sponsored prairie-dog eradication programs, less than 5 percent of the original prairie dog populations remain.

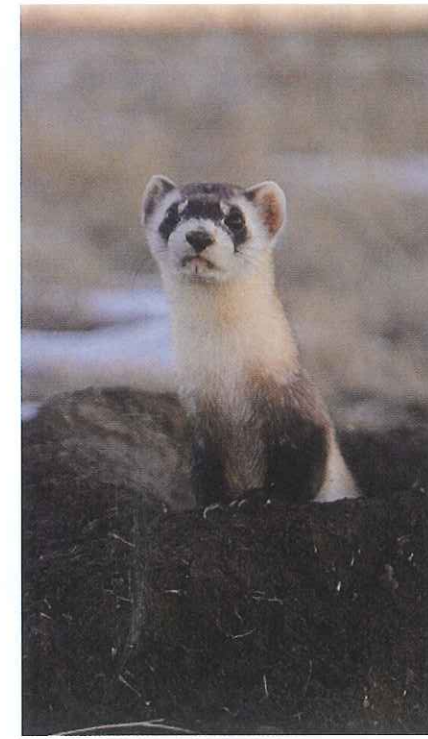
Larry Haverfield landed at the forefront of the debate after he became the lone voice for prairie dogs about two years ago at a county meeting, where about 100 people called for the poison-

ing campaign. After the meeting, he called Gordon Barnhardt, owner of the adjacent land he leases, and Ron Klataske of Audubon of Kansas. Together they drafted a letter to the Fish and Wildlife Service requesting the government evaluate their properties for black-footed ferret reintroduction. Finding it suitable habitat, federal biologists began preparing for ferret reintroduction. This thrilled the Haverfields. "Healthy grasslands need all the critters that belong here," says Larry.

In the meantime, to address neighbors' concerns, the Haverfields created a 30-yard-wide barrier strip of taller grass around the perimeter of their land to help keep prairie dog colonies from expanding. But the buffers did not satisfy the commissioners, who evoked a century-old state law that grants county governments the right to enter private land to poison prairie dogs—and then bill the landowner.

About a year ago county officials sent prairie dog exterminators to the Haverfield's leased land. To prevent more poisoning, Larry moved his cattle into the area. (It is illegal to apply this poison near cattle.) After trying unsuccessfully to force the couple to remove their cattle, the county took them to federal district court. While the judge ponders how much private property can be legally poisoned, if any, the county continues its poisoning campaign, maintaining that the only good prairie dog is a dead prairie dog. Several neighbors also have filed suit against the Haverfields, claiming their property values have been reduced.

To help in the fight, Defenders garnered national media coverage for the Haverfields and worked to solicit public support for the ferret reintroduction. As a result, federal officials received more than 16,000 comments in support of a Logan County reintroduction. "At stake is the ability of private landowners in Kansas simply to let native wildlife live



Rancher Larry Haverfield (left) releases an endangered black-footed ferret on land he leases in Kansas, and the animal immediately takes to its new digs in a prairie dog burrow (above).

on their land, free from state-ordered eradication," says Proctor. "If the landowners lose this case, the Logan County commissioners will destroy what is most likely the most wildlife-abundant piece of land in western Kansas, simply out of hatred for prairie dogs."

Federal officials didn't wait for a ruling on the case. At sunset on December 18, they lead the release of 14 black-footed ferrets onto the Haverfield's property—the first ferrets in Kansas in 50 years. But until the state law is changed, this controversy will not go away. Farm groups will continue to push for prairie dog eradication, while the Haverfields and others who value wildlife will continue to fight to create and protect healthy grassland ecosystems. "We won't give up," says Larry. "I have always felt close to the land. Having prairie dogs and ferrets on the land is the right thing to do. We might get beat, but we are not going to give up."

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