# A CLOSER LOOK

*Story and Photo by Craig Bihrle*

*Franklin's ground squirrel*

## THE GRAY GOPHER

Straight from the "Don't judge a book by its cover" cliché, we bring you the Franklin's ground squirrel, a secretive cousin of the Richardson's ground squirrel, which is often called the "flickertail" gopher (though neither are true gophers), and from which North Dakota derived its nickname, "The Flickertail State."

While flickertails are clearly visible sitting near their burrows in pastures or along mowed roadsides, Franklin's ground squirrels – sometimes called gray gophers – are seldom seen because they live in tall grasses such as undisturbed native prairie or idle grass stands, and along woodland edges.

This same idled or undisturbed grass is also the type of habitat in which many kinds of ducks and other birds build their nests. Despite their appearance as a "cute little gopher," Franklin's ground squirrels take advantage of their proximity to all these eggs on the ground and freely take and eat what they can find. They can be a significant predator of duck and other ground-nesting bird eggs in localized areas, and are even known to kill and eat freshly hatched young birds. Over a large landscape, however, they are not nearly as damaging as other nest predators like foxes or skunks.

In North Dakota, Franklin's ground squirrels *(Spermophilis franklinii)* live primarily north and east of the Missouri River. They may be abundant in localized areas, and then absent for many miles, even if there is similar habitat.

Like other ground squirrels, Franklin's live in burrows. They come out of hibernation in late April and early May as new grasses of the season are starting to grow. Females have one litter per year, typically 6-9 young that leave their mother by early July.

In addition to opportunistic feeding on bird eggs and newly-hatched young, Franklin's ground squirrels eat typical gopher food like roots, plants, seeds and fruit. Studies indicate that one-fourth to one-third of their diet can be animal matter. These 14-16 inch long animals are not at the top of the food chain, however, as they also serve as a food source for foxes, coyotes, badgers and hawks.

Male Franklin's ground squirrels begin settling in for their long winter's nap in late summer. By early September, when the growing season is over and grasses start to die back, both adult males and females are typically no longer active, an event that goes by mostly unnoticed, because they seldom show themselves the rest of the year either.

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