



located at 9550 Inver Grove Trail (Dakota County Road 77), Inver Grove Heights, Minn.

The Katharine Ordway
Natural History Study Area

Box 216
Inver Grove Heights, Minn. 55075
(612) 455-6204

ORDWAY
BULLETIN No. 53

MACALESTER
COLLEGE

QUIET RESIDENT at ORDWAY (II).

One seldom sees a live Pocket Gopher. It isn't because he is rare or even unusual; to the contrary, he is a quite numerous inhabitant of the grasslands and the grassy slopes of forest clearings. His secrecy comes from his living habits, which keep him out-of-sight at least 95% of the time. He is fossorial and is active both day and night although subterranean most of the time. The tunnel systems which he devises and constructs are quite complicated and he can spend his entire life therein, feeding on roots and tubers, sometimes even pulling vegetation downward from the surface into his tunnels as food. The first good sign that spring has returned "for good" is the appearance of the mounds caused by his digging for it indicates he has awakened from hibernation and that the frost has gone out of the ground.

Unusual as it is to catch sight of one of these prairie creatures it is quite common to observe evidences and to know that he is near at hand. He always leaves a mound of earth (quite in contrast to the "golden gopher") and one can tell by the texture of the earth spoil almost how long since the tunnelling took place. These mounds are characteristically fan-shaped and there is always a round earth plug which indicates the position of the opening into the tunnel for this is the last of the dirt to be pushed out, serving as a closed "back-door".

Specifically the particular resident is the Plains Pocket Gopher (Geomys bursarius) and he is peculiar to North America, ranging from the Canada border down to the Texas Gulf. If he is ever seen he is almost certain to be sitting haunchwise alongside his fresh mound, alertly surveying his surroundings; however, he does sometimes forage on the surface yet always alert to returning to the protection of his subterranean quarters. He is 20-25 cm in length (9") although the erect posture sometimes makes him look larger; and the tail is rather short - perhaps 6 cm (2½"); he may weigh around 300 gms (11 oz). He varies in color, locally being dark-gray and he has the outstanding feature - as do all gophers - of two large, yellow incisors which are constantly exposed to sight; these are the special equipment which furthers his diet of roots and tubers. Also present but not visible to the casual look - are a pair of cheek pouches open on either side of his face; these are fur-lined and reversible. His front feet are quite ugly, being large and curved and so equipped with long claws as to be very efficient digging tools; this magnificent adaptation has made it possible for this creature to occupy a special niche in nature and to fill it very well. Producing one litter a year in an underground nest, each of 3 - 5 young, this species is well-adapted for survival.

3 May 1977

R J CHRISTMAN, Naturalist
Katharine Ordway Natural
History Study Area.