

## Checking prairie dog holes for birds

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SCSU graduate student Rebekah Olson, of Medicine Lake, Mont., is spending a great deal of time looking into prairie dog holes in North Dakota, where she's studying the foraging behavior of burrowing owls.

Olson, in the ecology and natural resources master's program, is conducting the study with the help of a \$90,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service. She is looking into how owls use multiple-use landscapes for foraging, which is largely unknown, trapping small mammals and insects in different habitat types to see if prey are more abundant in particular types such as agricultural land, and capturing and radio-tagging adult male owls and following them around 24 hours a day see where they forage and hunt.

According to SCSU Associate Professor of Biological Sciences Marco Restani, who secured the grant and is supervising Olson's work, burrowing owls select prairie dog colonies near agriculture and crested wheatgrass fields rather than homogenous areas of grassland. He and Olson hypothesize that owls, which eat insects, small mammals and small birds, forage in those areas because there is more prey available. The finding will help the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service determine the impact of habitat conversion of the North American Great Plains, which has resulted in highly fragmented landscapes containing cropland, expanding woodland and remnants of prairie.

