

## Alberta farmers' fields overrun by gophers

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Stuart Somerville laughed when his two young boys chased gophers around flower pots, as they started popping up more and more frequently in mid-May.

But he knew the rodents' nonchalant behaviour around humans meant they would wreak havoc on his crops.

"We knew we had a problem when . . . the gophers would run up onto the porch with us. Normally they wouldn't come anywhere near people," said Somerville, who owns Ribstone Farm in Endiang, a hamlet in southeast Alberta.

The short winter and dry summer this year served as warnings to farmers in Alberta — Richardson's ground squirrels (commonly referred to as gophers) came out early and in droves.

"It felt like you were walking on gophers all the time," said Somerville from his 4,000-acre farm.

The hair around the noses of his three dogs is thinning from barking after the squirrels when they hide in the hollow piping of livestock fencing. “It drives (the dogs) nuts,” said Somerville.

The squirrels dig networks of tunnels and holes under farmers’ crops and ranchers’ pastures, leaving mounds of dirt and large sections of acreage razed. They eat the growth for protection, so they can see around them.

A boom in the gopher population causes grief for farmers and ranchers because of chewed crops and damage to equipment the mounds can cause.

“It’s a good year for gophers; it’s a bad year for damage,” says Phil Merrill, a pest specialist for the provincial government. It’s the worst he’s seen in a decade, with the potential for as much as 25 per cent damage to a crop. Somerville figures he has lost about 10 per cent of some of his crops.

Ground squirrels typically come out of hibernation in April, but Merrill and Somerville say they started popping up as early as February this year because of the warmer weather.

Whole sections of the farmer’s fields — especially canola, the Somervilles’ “major cash crop” — were chewed and are just starting to recover as some of the squirrels begin hibernation.

“Gophers are murder on canola. They love canola above all else,” he said. Somerville tries to avoid using poison on the squirrels, but “there was just no other way to do it.”

He spent much of June setting out poison bait, which Merrill says is already too late because the young gophers are already out and half the population could be underground at any time.

Even a tornado couldn’t budge the gophers on Somerville’s farm. When an official came to survey the destruction after one hit near their house, “there was nothing to show them because the gophers had eaten everything in the area where it had come down,” said Somerville. The grass there was about an inch high.

“There was nothing to damage.”

Somerville believes the boom in the squirrel population, like many changes to farming and growing seasons, is connected to climate change.

“They’re not really thinking of things like gophers,” he said.

University of Lethbridge professor emeritus Gail Michener, who has spent her career studying Richardson's ground squirrels, said they may simply be more obvious this year because of the drier weather.

"Ground squirrels are only part of the issue," Michener said. "When things aren't going well . . . it's tempting to put the blame on something else."