

Rio Grande ground squirrel enjoys fruits of the dunes

Story and photos by Anita Westervelt, South Texas Border Chapter

Cameron County's Isla Blanca Park, on South Padre Island, offers an abundance of species and is a grand place to explore during the annual City Nature Challenge. The parking lots themselves offer their own special diversity, and where we're most likely to see a Rio Grande ground squirrel (*Ictidomys parvidens*) -- and hopefully photograph the quick and illusive rodent. They blend in with the sandy landscape, scurry at speed and disappear without warning.

It was nearing late afternoon when we spied one feasting on wedgeleaf prairie clover (*Dalea emarginata*) at the edge of the curb as we traversed a parking lot. We stopped about 15 feet from the critter; the idling vehicle alerted it to flee. We waited, trying to see where it had gone, when there it was again, back at the clover.



It was intriguing to watch the tiny creature sit upright on its haunches and gnaw on a clover pod like we might eat corn-on-the-cob. Wedgeleaf prairie clover is a sandy soil legume native to the Texas Gulf beaches and coastal dune grasslands.

Rio Grande ground squirrel alert while feeding

Rio Grande ground squirrels populate the southern and western areas of Texas. They are less than 11 inches in length, their moderately bushy tail is about four and one-half inches long; they usually have nine rows of squarish white spots on the back of their coat and whitish buff underparts. Males weigh less than three-quarters of a pound, nearly twice as much as the female.

The squirrels like our coastal sands. Midland Rio Grande ground squirrels like brushy or grassy areas, mesquite and cactus flats, golf courses, cemeteries, city parks and along highway rights-of-way. They prefer sandy or gravelly soils for digging burrows; the entrance will be unmarked, without mounds of earth around it; a burrow can be one to several feet deep and may have an additional opening. There may be several burrows in its range, with one considered the homesite; the others are temporary refuges -- which may explain how our subject kept disappearing and reappearing. Their home range is a radius of about 50 yards.



Note Rio Grande squirrel's spotted coat

They are hunters and gathers. In early spring, their diet consists mostly of green vegetation. They feed on mesquite leaves and beans, berries, Johnsongrass, seeds and cultivated grains. In early summer, about half their diet includes insects. They are active all year in south Texas and hibernate in the rest of their range.