

**SMALL BUT MIGHTY:** Zeus, a black-tailed prairie dog, perches on the shoulder of car mechanic Nived Thepwipoom.



## Chatuchak goes to the prairie dogs

**C**opter is the spitting image of a gunslinger straight out of a John Ford western. There he stands in his period cowboy outfit, erect and pensive, peering into the distance while his arms dangle over a pair of colts strapped to his hips. He seems ready for a fast-draw duel, firing off a quick round at an unseen foe any second now.

He doesn't wear any boots, though. Nor does he have a horse waiting nearby so he could ride off on it into the sunset.

That's because Copter is a black-tailed prairie dog. He has been dressed up in the miniature

costume, complete with a cowboy hat and tiny plastic pistols, by her owner Natdraw Chomsri, a Bangkok travel agent who has brought Copter to a botanical garden behind the Chatuchak Weekend Market.

Each Sunday, local Thai enthusiasts of the rodents native to North America gather on a stretch of lawn in the park with their pets for an afternoon of socialising. On a recent Sunday some two dozen pet owners came with scores of prairie dogs. The animals, most of which are tethered with long leashes, do what prairie dogs normally do: they scamper around inquisitively, sprawl indolently, chew blades of grass or stand erect on their

**They're dressed as superheroes, gangsta rappers and Man U fans, and they're taking over the city one Sunday afternoon at a time** *By Tibor Krausz*

hind legs, the better to keep an eye out for signs of trouble.

Many of them are clad in small, handmade clothes: frilly skirts, plaid vests, tartan kilts, emblazoned T-shirts. "Sometimes I dress him up as Captain America, sometimes I dress him up as a playboy, sometimes I dress him up as a rock star with a

little guitar," Ms Natdraw says. "I've just ordered a Batman and a Superman costume for him."

Two-piece bikinis, traditional Chinese costumes, superhero outfits, evening dresses, hip-hop get-ups with bling — they, too, are popular with prairie dog owners. So are private school, 7-Eleven and nurse uniforms. "The more flashy or lifelike



**CREATURE COMFORTS:** Travel agent Natdraw Chomsri with Copter. Right, event organiser Seree Jangjamnan with Godji.



**A GOOD SPORT:** A prairie dog, dressed in a miniature Manchester United jersey, is wary of the camera in the botanical garden behind the Chatuchak Weekend Market.



**LOVED UP:** Two prairie dogs dressed in cute outfits frolic on the grass.



**WILD THINGS:** Prairie dogs in a cage inside the Tarzan Siam pet shop at the Chatuchak Weekend Market. Each of the animals costs upwards of 4,500 baht.

an outfit is, the more people like it for their prairie dogs," says Suthasinee Kumpai, an accountant who creates fancy handmade clothes and accessories (horn-rimmed glasses, flowered sunhats, bonnets with frou-frous) and sells them for a few hundred baht apiece.

Ms Suthasinee's business, which she largely conducts online, is booming. She doesn't have her own prairie dog, though. "I'm afraid it would bite me," she says.

Some of the animals, which boast formidable incisors, do bite. Honey, a female prairie dog, burrows deep into a visiting journalist's bag and proceeds to bite him when he makes a half-hearted attempt to fish her out. "She is in a bad mood," explains Honey's owner, Chayada Boonlue, a college student and aspiring actress. "She's a drama queen," Ms Chayada adds while Honey, lifted up by the nape of her burrowing and biting, squirms and chirps indignantly.

All the other animals, though, seem safely tame. They clamber onto people's shoulders to watch the world from a higher vantage point, and they allow people to hold, pet and baby them lovingly. In their brightly coloured little dresses, the prairie dogs appear like stuffed toys that have somehow come alive.

"They are cute and smart," says Nived Thepwipoom, a mechanic who owns 20 prairie dogs and helps run a fan club for local enthusiasts of the rodents. "They listen to their names and you can train them." Two of his prairie dogs, Zeus and Shadow, wear identical miniature Manchester United jerseys as a testament to Mr Nived's other passion.

Across Bangkok, the herbivorous borrowing rodents, which are native to the grasslands of North America, have become much sought-after exotic pets for thousands of people. Many of them congregate regularly in parks so their animals can spend some time with their kind. The get-togethers also serve as opportunities for owners to show off their prairie dogs' latest costumes. Occasionally the animals' enthusiasts stage fancy-dress competitions at shopping malls.

Seree Jangjamnan, an event organiser, has come with Godji, a two-year-old prairie dog. The animal, dressed in a brown shirt emblazoned with a sequined human skull, perches on Mr Seree's shoulder. "He's a bit aloof and likes to be

by himself," Mr Seree says. "I bring him here so he can fool around with other prairie dogs."

Momentarily, Mr Seree's fiancée, Pornpip Homrod, produces a frilly pink skirt and puts it on Godji, who is named after the gas company PTT's chubby blue cartoon dinosaur mascot. "He's a boy, but I like to dress him in girly clothes," Ms Pornpip, who works as an accountant, says with a giggle. "He doesn't mind." Godji tries to wriggle out of the skirt: perhaps he does mind getting cross-dressed, after all.

Prairie dogs are ground squirrels and have earned their name from the barking sounds they make to warn the members of their large colonies about approaching snakes, eagles or coyotes. Back in their homelands, in the United States, Canada and Mexico, they are often seen as pests, poisoned by cattle farmers and hunted for sport.

Not so in Thailand. Here they are pampered pets, each of which costs upwards of 4,500 baht. Rare white varieties, whose colour is the result of albinism, can fetch around 60,000 baht if they have the usual black eyes — or a whopping 120,000 baht if they have red eyes.

"They're a popular pet," says Ismaan Yenjai, who owns Tarzan Siam, a pet shop at the exotic animal section of Chatuchak Market, and specialises in prairie dogs. Currently he has about 100 of them for sale, including two white ones, which serve as a big draw for prairie dog lovers who can't afford to buy them but come to admire them.

As prairie dogs don't breed well in Thailand, Mr Ismaan says, the animals need to be imported from the US, which makes them more expensive. But they're worth it, he adds. By nature, the animals are sociable and gregarious, which makes them good pets if you're willing to spend a couple of hours each day training them and attending to their various needs.

"They're like actual dogs. Sort of like chihuahuas," Mr Ismaan says. "They bond with you and they also bond with other animals you have at home, like cats and dogs," he explains. "You can carry them around on a leash when you go out."

You can also watch TV with them. That's what Ms Natdraw likes to do with Copter. "I love watching animated movies with Alvin and the Chipmunks," she says. "Copter likes the chipmunks, too. He's naughty and funny just like them." ■

“  
The more flashy or lifelike an outfit is, the more people like it for their prairie dogs  
SUTHASINEE KUMPAI