



Black-tailed Prairie Dogs



Prairie Dogs

Prairie dogs are named for their habitat and warning calls, which sound similar to a dog's bark. They are a rodent that belongs to the squirrel family. The genus (*Cynomys*) is derived from the Greek word for "dog mouse". In the 1804 journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition it states that in September 1804, they discovered a village of an animal the French called the Prairie Dog.

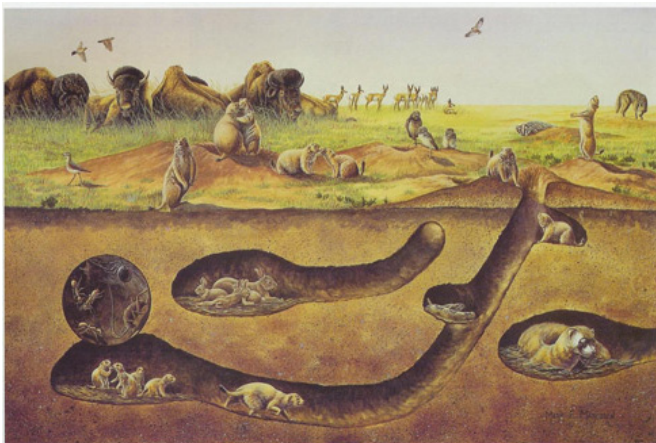
There are five species of prairie dogs: Black-tailed, White-tailed, Gunnison, Utah and Mexican. The only specie of prairie dogs in Scotts Bluff National Monument is the Black-tailed prairie dog, named for the black tip of its tail.

Prairie Dog Description

Prairie dogs are small, short-tailed animals with small ears set far back on their heads. Their light-brown hair blends well with the dirt of their mounds. Named for their bark-like warning call and black-tipped tail, these prairie dogs average 12 to 16 inches in length and weigh 1 to 3 pounds. With short, muscular legs and long-nailed toes on their front and hind feet, they are well equipped for a burrowing lifestyle. Although the prairie dog has been known to live for at least eight years in captivity, its average life span in the wild is usually three to four years.



Prairie Dog Colonies & Ecosystem



Prairie dog colonies, sometimes referred to as towns, are most recognizable by the mounds and holes at their burrow entrances. A colony will typically have 30 to 50 burrow entrances per acre. Mounds of excavated soil around the burrow entrance are generally cone-shaped and vary from one to three feet in height and from three to ten feet in diameter. These mounds serve as lookout points and to prevent water from entering the burrows. Tunnels are generally three to six feet below the surface and about 15 feet long. Burrow systems include several chambers, including one near the surface where the prairie dog can sit and listen for activity

above ground. A typical prairie dog town consists of groups of prairie dogs that occupy and protect small areas within the town. These groups of prairie dogs are known as coterie. A typical coterie consists of one adult male, three or four adult females, and their young up to one year of age. The residents of each coterie protect their territory from intruders, including prairie dogs from other coterie within the town.

The largest prairie dog colony on record was in Texas, and was about 100 miles wide, 250 miles long and contained as estimated 400 million animals.

Predators

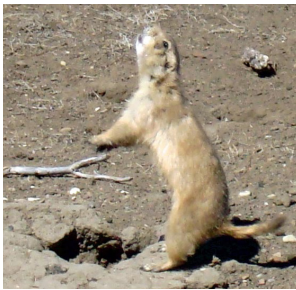
Common predators of the prairie dogs include coyotes, bobcats, eagles, hawks, foxes, badgers and weasels. The black-footed ferret is perhaps one of the rarest animals in North America and depends primarily upon prairie dogs for food. The ferret has been endangered due to the widespread poisoning of prairie dog towns. Other animals may also be found in prairie dog towns. Snakes, including rattlesnakes, and burrowing owls are fond of using abandoned burrows as homes.



Prairie dogs are susceptible to a number of diseases, the most notable being sylvatic plague. Sylvatic plague is a bacterial disease transmitted by fleas that can affect numerous species of mammals, including humans; however, it is very rare for a person to come down with plague.

Humans are undoubtedly the most significant mortality factor that the prairie dog faces. Some of the factors that have taken their toll on prairie dogs are the conversion of rangeland to cropland, urban development, hunting and poisoning.

Communication



Black-tailed prairie dogs have at least 11 distinct calls and a variety of postures and displays. When a prairie dog detects danger, it retreats to a burrow mound and gives a series of short nasal type yips as a warning. Nearby prairie dogs stop what they are doing, stand on their hind legs and look for the source of danger. If there is no danger, the prairie dogs will come out and give a “jump-yip” call to reclaim their territory.

Food

Prairie dogs feed primarily on plants, selecting forbs (flowering plants) and grasses high in moisture content and nutritive value to supply their needs for water and energy. In addition to the vegetation it eats, the prairie dog also clips, but does not eat, much vegetation within its colony. This is probably done to keep the vegetation clipped short to provide an unobstructed view of approaching predators. It takes roughly 250 prairie dogs to eat as much grass as a 1,000 pound cow.

Breeding

Prairie dogs only give birth to one litter per year. The breeding season is mid-March to mid-April, with the young being born four to five weeks later. The size of the litter varies from two to eight young. During May and early June, the young begin to emerge from their burrows. At this time, yearlings and some adults may relocate, leaving the young pups to feel secure both socially and environmentally in the old burrow. When prairie dogs relocate, they take over abandoned holes or dig new holes at the edge of the town.

Hibernation

Prairie dogs do not go into true hibernation, but periods of dormancy or “stupor” during the coldest periods of the winter. Their activity and appetite are decreased during winter. They may sleep for many days at a time, but the town is usually active during the milder days of winter.

Environment

In many ways, a prairie dog town can be considered a biological oasis. Many wildlife species associate with prairie dogs. Some species feed on prairie dogs, but others utilize the burrow systems or the unique habitat to fulfill their needs. Vacant burrows are used by cottontail rabbits, several species of small rodents and by burrowing owls. Meadowlarks, grasshopper sparrows, and other birds are found in greater numbers in prairie dog towns than in the surrounding rangeland because they are attracted to the open spaces, where seeds and insects are more accessible.

Prairie dogs are not always compatible with agricultural interests. By eating and clipping vegetation, the prairie dog does compete with livestock and other grazing animals. The economic impact of the prairie dog on rangeland is difficult to assess and depends on a number of factors, including the density of prairie dogs, the amount of rainfall, the presence of livestock, and the condition of rangeland.

However, the prairie dog and large grazing animals, such as bison, can benefit from each other's presence. In areas where there is taller vegetation, domestic livestock keep vegetation cropped low, which allows the prairie dog to occur in areas where it wouldn't otherwise be found.

