

THE PRAIRIE DOG

Introduction

The prairie dog, whose generic name Cynomys, means dog-like mouse is in reality a ground squirrel. Their only similarity to a dog is their bark like call.

Description

Prairie dogs are plump, short-eared burrowing rodents with coarse buff-colored fur. One species, the black-tailed prairie dog has, as his name implies, black hairs covering the tip of the tail. The white-tailed conversely has a shorter tail tipped with white hairs. These large ground squirrels have very muscular legs which they use to advantage when burrowing. They range in body length from 11 to 14 inches; and their weight may be from 1 1/2 to 3 pounds each. To protect his eyes from the strong rays of the sun, nature has equipped the prairie dog with orange-colored lenses, but he does not tax this special feature for he goes below ground during the hottest time of the day.

Habits

Prairie dogs are highly sociable by nature, and by living in their densely populated colonies they enjoy protection in numbers. Individual families occupy each burrow and collectively these burrows are grouped together in towns. The mouth of each burrow is provided with a mound which the animal uses as a lookout post from which he can survey the scene around him. If danger is eminent, he will sound the alarm with a shrill piercing chirp or whistle. This so called "bark" from which the prairie dog gets his name is accompanied by a flip of his tail, an upthrust of the sleek body, and an extension of the small forepaws skyward. Immediately following this action the animal ducks into his burrow to wait out the situation. Other members of the community behave in similar manner and if a predator is in their midst, the whole town is quickly evacuated. Once they are below ground each animal occupies his listening post niche just below the entrance to his burrow. When all clear is determined, they pop out of their burrows one after another.

Burrows

The burrow is the prairie dog's home and consists of a main vertical tunnel with several laterals. A mound rings the entrance to each burrow and serves as a watch tower as well as a dike to keep out water from heavy rains. Dirt from excavating the burrow is used to build the mound, and the dogs pound this dirt into place with their noses. Each burrow consists of the vertical tunnel ten or more feet deep, and going off horizontally a living chamber, a nesting chamber, and a listening niche near the entrance. In older towns many of the burrows are interconnected so more than one entrance exists.

Reproduction

Prairie dogs mate in February, March, or April and some thirty-odd days later the young are born in litters of about five. At birth the prairie dog is blind, without hair, and weighs about half an ounce. They stay underground about four to five weeks. During that time they become well furred, their eyes open, and they can make sounds. They begin eating green food after their initial trip above ground, even though they are still not weaned. After the mother weans a pup it automatically takes off to find a new place of abode. This may be a deserted burrow nearby or a new one created on the perimeter of the town.

Food and Hibernation

Even though the prairie dog is omnivorous, he eats far more vegetation than anything else. They eat almost any plant that may happen to grow in and around their town. Since they live in semiarid climates, the animal seldom has an opportunity to drink water. The main source of water for prairie dogs is the juice of green plants and roots of perennial grasses. They will drink from puddles after a rainstorm, but rely chiefly on their ability to manufacture water in their bodies by the metabolic conversion of carbohydrates.

Although the prairie dog does go below ground for varying periods during the winter, he is not a true hibernator. They are often seen being active above ground on most warm days during the winter foraging on any available vegetation. They exist over the winter mainly on fat accumulated during the plant growing season.

Enemies

The prairie dog has many enemies. Badger, eagles, coyotes, and black-footed ferrets appear to be the most successful predators on the prairie dog. Rattlesnakes and burrowing owls are two other mortal enemies also feared by him. Their sentinel system and deep burrows are the best safeguards these little animals have against their common enemies.

Historic Notes

The Great Plains, extending from Canada to Mexico were once occupied by almost endless "towns" of prairie dogs. The advance of civilization caused their decline. Today these animals are mostly confined to National Parks and National Wildlife Refuges where they can be seen and enjoyed by all people.