

Watch “Dogs”

Prairie dogs are really ground squirrels. When Lewis and Clark first saw them on their expedition, they called them “barking squirrels” because of their high-pitched, bark-like call. Later, immigrants came to the plains and built homes of sod—blocks of grass and dirt. These early settlers called the animals “prairie dogs” and “sod poodles.” The name “prairie dog” stuck.

Prairie dogs are an important prey for many grassland predators. Coyotes, badgers, snakes, black-footed ferrets, eagles, and hawks all eat prairie dogs. Prairie dogs protect each other by keeping a watch out for trouble. When a prairie dog sees a predator it gives an alarm call, warning the others to take cover. The prairie dogs disappear quickly into the tunnels of their underground “town.” The tunnels are connected

and have several entrance holes. If a predator invades one hole, the prairie dogs can escape through another.

Prairie dogs have a complex language. They make distinct sounds to identify different threats. One sound may mean “Watch your back, snake approaching.” Another kind of bark might indicate “Hawk is overhead!” The first prairie dog to notice an approaching menace gives a sharp warning call and then plunges into its burrow. Other sentinels farther from the danger zone take up the watch. Their cries will send more of the town’s residents hustling to their holes.

Just below the ground, there are small hollows off the side of the tunnels. These are the listening posts. Prairie dogs sit there to watch and listen for threats above. When each watch “dog” is sure that everything is okay, it gives the “all-clear” alert so the community knows the danger has passed.



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