

NATURE DETECTIVES



SUMMER 1995

Little Burrow on the Prairie



Hi! I'm prairie dog. Let me tell you a little about myself. First of all I'm not a dog. I'm a rodent. I weigh three pounds and I'm 17 inches long. My short brown fur is just about the same color as the dirt I've been digging in. You're probably having a hard time finding my ears. Small, aren't they? My legs are small too. But, they're strong (for digging, you know) and fast when they have to be. There are five claws on each of my paws. They are powerful enough to rip up soil. They are skillful enough to hold a single blade of grass while I nibble. I have brown eyes which are high on the sides of my head. It's easier to watch for danger - from the side, back or overhead. My front two teeth are long for gnawing my food. I don't like to stay in one place for very long so...bye bye. See you later!



Burrow Blueprints

COME ON OVER TO MY HOUSE!

I use this dirt mound deck around my front door like a watch tower. From up here it's easier to see danger coming. The mound helps keep rain and bigger animals out

This is my secret escape door. Sometimes a heavy rain will wash my front door shut. Then I use my escape door until I can dig my front door open again. I also use it when one of my enemies - a rattler or worse yet a badger - gets into my burrow. Out the back I go!

Over here I have a listening room. I duck in here when there is trouble. Before I go outside again, I listen for the sentinel's "all clear" bark.

Here is the nursery. I've been bringing in bits of grass to get ready for my babies. They should be here any time now.

This is the bathroom. I only use it when the weather is horrible. Then I clean it out as soon as I can.

If it rains hard and my burrow fills with water, I come to this flood room for safety. Hopefully the water won't reach me here.

OPEN HOUSE



Where We Live

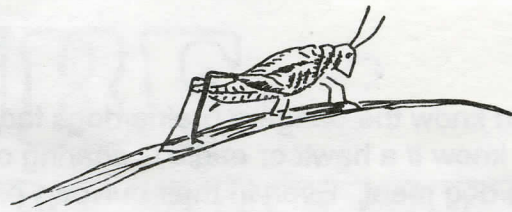
To see a prairie dog and its neighbors in action, visit Broomfield County Commons Open Space. The historical prairie dog town has been around a long time! Be sure to look for nose prints. Prairie dogs tamp down the earth of newly made mounds with their noses.

dig... dig... bark... yip... yip... jump... yip... dig... dig... dig... dig... dig... dig... jump...

Prairie Dog Talk

Prairie dogs are busy, noisy, little creatures. They wag their tails more than puppy dogs. They chuckle and click their teeth. They even kiss and hug to say "Hi, Mom" or "Hey, I know you - you're one of us!"

The pattern, number, rhythm, and volume of barks let prairie dogs talk to each other better than most other animals can. The dogs not only warn of danger but what type of danger and how urgent? Coyote or hawk? Near or far? "Yip, yip" tells everyone in town to be alert. A single loud "Yip" sends everyone scurrying for a hole. Sentinels announce when danger has passed with an enthusiastic "Yip" and a jump that sometimes sends them into a backwards somersault.

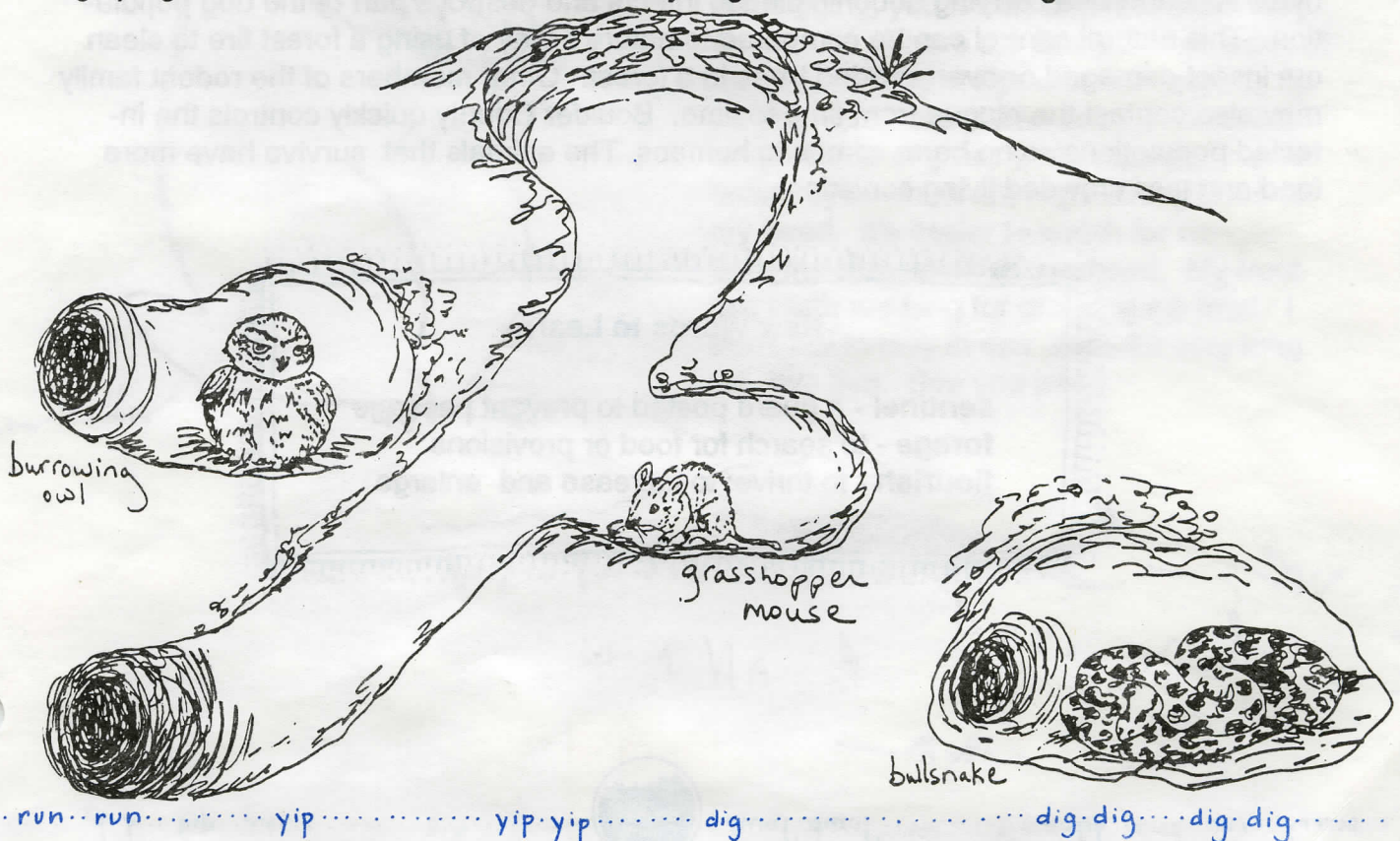


Neighbors Helping Neighbors

Prairie dogs help their wild neighbors when they forage on weeds, seeds, and grasses. They stir up insects and seeds which meadowlarks and other birds eat. Keeping grasses mowed down in the prairie dog community allows a variety of plants to grow. This creates a habitat where more plants and animals can flourish. In the old west, buffalo favored the grasses growing in prairie dog towns. Prairie dog activity encourages grasses that are especially nutritious - rich in protein and nitrogen.

Uninvited Guests

Prairie dogs often have to put up with uninvited guests who stay and stay and stay. Bullsnares, burrowing owls, mice, spiders, rabbits, even foxes make themselves at home in prairie dog burrows. Some raise babies there too! But, if a rattlesnake moves in, prairie dogs plug the tunnel with dirt. That's one way to get rid of an uninvited guest!



Danger!

Do you know the dangers prairie dogs face every time they leave their burrows? They never know if a hawk or eagle is soaring overhead ready to swoop down and snatch a prairie dog meal. Even in their burrows prairie dogs aren't completely safe from digging badgers. And the lucky "dogs" who scurry out to escape the badger's long claws often find a lurking coyote, who of course is also hungry!

How do prairie dogs survive? First of all, every burrow has two entrances so there is always a way to escape. And whenever prairie dogs come out of their burrows to eat or be



social, one of them is watching from a mound for predators. If this "watch dog" senses danger it barks an alarm call and dives for the listening chamber. Each prairie dog that hears the alarm passes it on until all the animals in town are alerted and have taken cover. The watch dog listens and peeks from the chamber until the predator leaves.

It's a dog's life!

A Deadly Flea

What happens when there are too many prairie dogs in a prairie dog town? Nature takes over. A deadly flea carrying bubonic plague infects and destroys part of the dog population. This natural control can be compared to nature's way of using a forest fire to clean out insect damaged or overcrowded trees in a forest. Other members of the rodent family may also contact the plague from time to time. Boulder County quickly controls the infected populations so no harm comes to humans. The animals that survive have more food and less crowded living conditions.

New Words to Learn

sentinel - a guard posted to prevent passage

forage - to search for food or provisions

flourish - to thrive; to increase and enlarge

scurry... run... yip... jump... jump

dig... yip... bark