ON THE WICHITAS

The Sociable, Curious Prairie Dog

The Prairie Dog

As dawn slips over the prairie, the crowns of tiny heads begin to emerge from small craters — slowly, cautiously. And suddenly, as if pushed from below, full heads pop up, and bright eyes survey the landscape. A new day has begun at Prairie Dog Town.

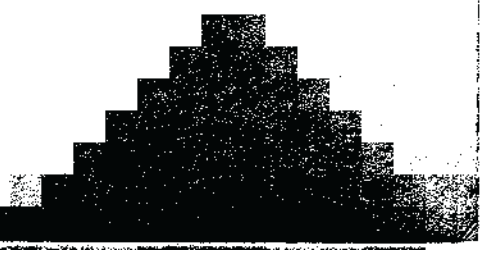
Prairie dog towns are the social center of the prairie all year long. With the exception of waterholes or lakes, more wildlife congregates at a prairie dog town than anywhere else on the prairie. Buffalo visit the dog towns to wallow in the loose earth. Crickets, beetles, fleas, and spiders often live in the burrows with prairie dogs. Other mammals or birds, such as field mice, rabbits, ground squirrels, and burrowing owls, use burrows that have been abandoned. Rattlesnakes and bullsnakes use burrows to escape the intense summer heat and capture mice, insects, and rarely even prairie dogs that live there.

The prairie dogs are also the natural prey of coyotes, foxes, bobcats, hawks, and golden eagles. Because of their many enemies, prairie dogs have learned to be very cautious. Their eyes, located high on their heads, constantly scan the area for danger. And since the animals are almost always out of their burrows in large numbers, many eyes are available to spot possible predators. A warning bark is given at the first sign of danger, and all the prairie dogs react by repeating the bark and running toward their burrows.

The burrow, the most remarkable home of any North American mammal, is the focal point of the prairie dogs' lives. No two burrows are exactly alike. Nor do any burrows stay the same for long. Like us, prairie dogs make alterations as they live in their homes, plugging and unplugging entrances, digging new tunnels and rooms, and enlarging or closing off old ones.

The crater-shaped entrance to the burrow serves as a watchtower and a dike. The prairie dog spends hours excavating dirt and packing it firmly in place with his nose to build the crater. Down from the crater, a 5 to 20-foot vertical runway levels off to a tunnel, sometimes 80 feet long. This underground home usually has side tunnels: a couple of bedrooms, toilet, storage room, nursery, and listening post. From the bottom of the runway, the burrow often slants up toward the surface where an enlargement creates an air trap. Here, prairie dogs seek refuge if their burrow floods. The runway also often hides another tunnel where the prairie dogs can escape when danger is present.

Among the most sociable of animals, prairie dogs live together in towns. Within the towns, prairie dogs group together in clans, much like our neighborhoods. The clan offers community cooperation. Clan members share burrows in time of danger, help one another dig new homes, share food resources, defend one another from members of other clans, share sentry duties, and generally live an active life together. Prairie dogs greet other clan members with a "kiss," sometimes following it with a bit of grooming as an expression of friendship.

Some people, who find themselves liking prairie dogs, express their attraction and enjoyment by feeding them. Because prairie dogs are naturally curious, they will eat almost anything they are given. Unfortunately, many of our foods lack sufficient water and nutrients to keep prairie dogs healthy. Besides, prairie dogs, like all wild animals, should gather their own food. If they become dependent on human handouts, they lose their ability to survive as wild animals.

PLEASE DON'T FEED THE PRAIRIE DOGS