

Black-Tailed Prairie Dog Program

Audience: 2-3rd grade

Title of Program: Black-Tailed Prairie Dogs: Social Squirrels and Keystone Species

Indoor program with potential for Prairie Dog Town game outside

Program Theme: Black-tailed prairie dogs are social animals that have evolved a complex system of communication to survive. They are a keystone species because 100-150 other species rely on the prairie dog to survive, both by utilizing the habitats they create and the food source they provide.

Objectives or Main Ideas:

1. The black-tailed prairie dog is a rodent that builds burrows.
2. Prairie dogs are social animals and have evolved a complex system of communication for protection.
3. Predators and neighbors use the habitat created by prairie dogs (keystone species).
4. Play Prairie Dog Town Game.

Interpretive Resources for the Program (available at Walden Ponds VN Center):

Ecosystem Posters: Prairie Dog Ecosystem, Grasslands, Burrows (with sunflowers in the corner)

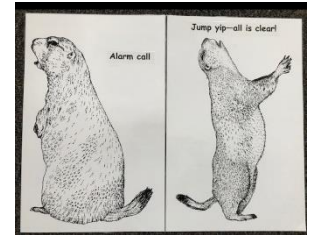
Stuffed Animals: black-tailed prairie dog, coyote, bald eagle, squirrel, rattlesnake, smallest owl, red fox

Prairie Dog Activity Bag: Include black and white laminated behavior posters, keystone species and ecosystem poster, string to create mock burrows for game.

Prairie Dog Mount

Prairie Dog Skull

Styrofoam Burrow Display



Set Up: Make coterie circles and move tables to the side of the room. Keep one table for the presenters to use for the mount.

Introduction:

Thank everyone for the opportunity to be here to talk about prairie dogs. Prairie dogs are very social and very important to life in Boulder County.

Program:

- The black-tailed prairie dog (have group examine the prairie dog mount)
 - What physical characteristics and behavior indicate that this is a prey species? (earth-colored for camouflage, chunky body, teeth for grinding vegetation [not meat], eye placement on side of head, builds burrows for cover and safety from predators, alarm calls to warn of predators)
 - What physical characteristics indicate that prairie dogs are adapted for digging holes and living in burrows? (claws to dig, relatively long and narrow body shape, small ears don't get in the way)

- Communication
 - Prairie dogs are not very fast or agile, so they rely on other adaptations to keep them safe, especially communication. They have a variety of calls to communicate alert, threat, warning, threat has passed, and “pleasure”)
 - Prairie dogs live in family units called “coterie.” Many coterie make a colony. Let’s divide into coterie!
 - Split kids into six groups of 2-3 and make up a language for the behaviors on the posters. Instead of kissing, kids can do a high-five greeting for friends and family.
 - Other Communication: sun-bathing, jump & yip, alert, nesting, putting on weight, sleeping
- Predators & prey, neighbors & relatives
 - Determine which stuffed animals (that represent the “neighbors” in a prairie dog colony) are predators or prey and explain why. Each coterie gets one animal and has a couple minutes to discuss. Then ask: “Who thinks they have a predator or prey? How do you think the prairie dogs react to this particular neighbor?”
- Prairie Dog Town Game
 - With kids inside the six circles representing their coterie, present a series of scenarios and have the kids act them out:
 - Sunbathing on a warm day
 - Sleeping
 - Foraging for food
 - Greeting a family member
 - Ask for volunteer “predators.” Have the remaining prairie dogs try and gather the “food” without getting caught by a predator.
 - Have volunteer kids place non-predatory stuffed animals within the prairie dog colony in the appropriate habitat.

Conclusion:

Thank you again for inviting us here today to share this important and fascinating animal that helps support so many other species in Boulder County!

Originally created by Volunteer Naturalists Amy Scanes-Wolfe and Amanda Smith, March 2020. Revised by Deborah Price, October 2020.