

Exerpts from:  
*“Our comic friend the Prairie Dog and  
the story of Prairie Dog Town, Texas!”*

**Written in 1973 by Frank Oliver in cooperation with A. C. Hamilton,  
Director of the City of Lubbock’s Parks and Recreation Department from 1944-1973.**

Of all Nature’s wild creatures, none is more appealing and entertaining to watch than the Prairie Dog. The little mammal is a born comic and ‘ham’ and where he might be seen as close range he keeps his audience squealing with delight and affection. One might suspect the prairie dog of purposely planning his habitat to be a stage on which to perform!

While the prairie dog has been around for thousands of years, little has been known or recorded of its lifestyle until recent times. Most Americans have heard of the little animal but many have never seen one or know what it does and why

In dim, distant ages past, the prairie dog separated from its cousins, the Rodentia -rats , mice, beavers, nutria, porcupines – and the Sciuridae – chipmunks, groundhogs, ground squirrels – and adapted itself to the broad, treeless plains and grasslands of the American West. With no trees in which to live, it burrows into the earth and eats available grasses. Technically, it is a large burrowing ground squirrel and ranges from the Mississippi River valley westward to the Rockies and from Canada into Mexico.

Few animals have had more interesting names. The Indian called the prairie dog wishtonwish for its shrill warning whistle. Early explorers named it Louisiana Marmot, barking squirrel and petit chien for its dog-like, yipping bark and the wagging tail. Lewis and Clark first wrote of the animal in 1806 but it remained unclassified for another century. Not until 1955 was the first extensive group behavior study and report of the prairie dog made. Its official, scientific name is *Cynomys ludovicianus*. It is divided simply into two classes, the white-tailed and the blacked-tailed, each having several sub-species. The white-tailed prairie dog lives in the higher elevations and mountains and the blacked-tailed prairie dog lives on the lower plains and prairies. Our story refers primarily to the blacked-tailed West Texas.

The prairie dog is beautiful animal. Full grown it weighs one to four pounds and is 14 to 17 inches from its nose to the end of its flat, 4 ½ - inch tail. Short, powerful legs and sharp toenails make it great little bulldozer and ditch digger. Like its close cousin, the groundhog, and its distant one, the squirrel, the prairie dog sits erect to watch and eat, holding food in its paws. Nature has provided the mammal with keen senses. Large, almond-shaped eyes, stubby ears and sensitive nose are set high in its broad head for protection. Two sharp incisors neatly clip roots and stems and large molars do the chewing. Cheek pouches store a little something extra for later snacks. It is covered with a coat of fine, soft fur the color of which runs from ground-neutral to nearly black, and from buff to cinnamon to reddish brown. Its tail is always tipped in black and seldom still. Adult males and females are difficult to distinguish, except that she is slightly smaller and double row nipples down her front in the Spring gives her away. The prairie dogs mates in January and February and a litter of four or five pups is born in March or April, slick as sausages and hungry as. prairie dogs. They develop rapidly and at about four or five weeks are

ready to poke their little noses above ground to see what's going on. The prairie dog is an unusually curious animal.

The rodent is primarily a vegetarian, living on grasses, herbs and weeds not often palatable to live-stock. Occasionally it will supplement its diet with grasshoppers, beetles, spiders and other small insects. Like another cousin, the desert rat, the prairie dog does not drink water but gets needed body moisture from its food. The little character is easily spoiled in captivity and will grow fat on bread, potato chips, crackers and anything sweet. But not nuts. A dog will carefully open a tossed peanut, remove the nuts and eat the shell! It is a clean animal and under ideal conditions, may live ten or twelve years.

Possibly what makes the prairie dog so fascinating to the human observer is the study of its social order, which in many ways is similar to our own. And, though it goes about its daily activities in dead earnestness, its antics are hilarious-and endearing-to us.

Unlike some of its relatives, the prairie dog is gregarious and sociable with others of its kind. It lives in colonies, or towns that consist of dozens or hundreds of individual, adjacent burrows, or apartments. Each burrow is occupied by single family of two adults and several young who go about their daily routines of work, play, raising the children, stocking the larder and maintaining and protecting life, limb and the mortgage. At one time, West Texas contained thousands of prairie dog towns with a total estimated population of just under one billion. One town covered 37,00 acres and housed 400 million prairie dogs.

The prairie dog's burrow is well engineered and efficient home. While burrows may vary, they generally follow a pattern. The entrance is an opening about four or five inches in diameter, centered in a volcano-like mound 8 to 12 inches high. This mound is two six feet in diameter and serves as a lookout tower, a protection from flood and fire, a ready refuge in time of danger, and the neighborhood meeting place. The animal continually maintains its mound, repairing cracks and damage and varying its height and shape. It is normally bare of vegetation because of all the traffic, but surrounding grass is kept low to insure clear visibility at all times. Old timers in West Texas used to predict the weather by checking the varying heights of prairie dog mounds!

The burrow is dug straight down or at a slight angle for 12 to 20 feet where it then runs horizontally in a 'T' or 'L' shape for another 10 to 15 feet. Ascending shafts and air vents are dug off this tunnel with one or more terminating in well camouflaged emergency exits 20 to 20 feet from the main entrance. One shaft usually stops just short of the surface with its terminus enlarged. This serves as a catch-all for refuse, loose dirt and trash and, ingeniously, a planned air pocket for trapped dogs in time of flood. From there it's just quick dig to freedom. Various chambers branch off the burrow and make up the apartment- one or more bedrooms with wall to wall grass carpet, toilet, nursery, dry room, turnaround room (any will do) and pantry. The conning tower of the burrow is the "listening room" or "barking room" located about six feet below the entrance. Here the sentry- usually the adult male- remains on guard whenever the family is "in".

Thousands of years of conditioning have kept the prairie dog keenly alert for its arch enemies and predators, the blacked-footed ferret (now almost extinct), coyote, bobcat, badger, fox and weasel-and From the first light of the day when eyes cautiously peek over the rim of the mound, until the last rays of the setting sun, the watchword is caution. As the day progresses, one or more sentries sit in constant vigilance at the burrow entrance while the surrounding area

buzzes with activity. At the first hint of danger a series of quick “yek’-ing barks erupts, along with frantic tail wagging. Instantly all activity ceases. Red alert. The barking spreads. If danger persists, the barking becomes frenzied, and when it reaches four-barks-per-second, that’s it. Everybody dives for his, or the nearest, hole. In moments the place is cleared: When the dogs scurry below, the sentry is the last one down. He stays in the “listening room” throughout the crisis to keep tab on things topside and relay signals to those below. If danger passes quickly, the sentry carefully checks the situation, and assured that all is once again safe, gives the “territorial call” or “all-clear”. He throws his head back and lets go with one quick, high-pitched squeak or squeal sometimes with such enthusiasm that he falls over backwards! Prairie dogs communicate in a variety of ways and for number of reasons, all of which make intriguing study and observation.

Like we humans, the prairie dog divides its town into territories in which neighboring animals are more familiar with each other than with, say, somebody over on Rattlesnake Avenue. Within this territory, however it is defined, the rodent conducts its day to day activities. But, just let someone from the other side of town waddle in and the fur flies. On warm days when danger seems remote, wholesale sun bathing takes place. Even adults never lose their love for play and hi-jenks is the order of the afternoon, with much tussling, chasing and mock fighting going on. Friends and relations nuzzle, kiss and groom one another and there is spirited gossip and “chitting” Adult dogs never abandon the burrow overnight, but the kids love to visit and spend the night with Petey. It is interesting to see a mound virtually covered with two adults and seven or eight youngsters. Prairie dog puppies, like all puppies, are always full of play and it is they who are most entertaining. Chase, tag, tussle and scrap go on by the hour. A ball of fur may come rolling down a mound only to burst into a half dozen dogs who scatter in all directions. And all the while the sentry is watching, watching....

Indeed, the prairie dog is a comic, a real Texas character, and our Friend.

Back in the 1930’s when government’s poisoning program began to be effective, a pair of Lubbock citizens became alarmed and concerned for the survival of the species. Mr. and Mrs. Kennedy N. Clapp established the first protected prairie dog colony right in the middle of Mackenzie Park in the northeast part of the city. They started with four dogs and two burrows. In 1935, when the park became Mackenzie State Park.

The prairie dog became such an asset and goodwill ambassador for the city that Lubbock adopted it as its mascot. Pete the Prairie Dog assumed international status. And, because of his contribution to his city and state and his concern for the little rodent, the late Mr. Clapp was appointed Mayor of the Prairie Dog Town in perpetuity.

Along with the prairie dog, two other common residents of the prairie dog town are the rattlesnake and the Burrowing Owl, often called the Dog Owl. At one time it was thought these three were especially friendly because of their close association. It soon discovered, however, that the owl and the rodent, while sometimes “tolerating” one another, are avowed enemies. And the rattlesnake also isn’t anybody’s friend. Both the owl and the snake (and a few other snakes like the bull and the hog-nose) prey on young and sick dogs, but the rattlesnake also has a yen for young owls and owl eggs! When the snake enters a burrow hoping to find an unwary prairie dog he is most apt to run into

Trouble. The not so unwary dog and its family burst from their emergency exits, circle back around to the door through which the snake entered and, frantically digging and barking, quickly

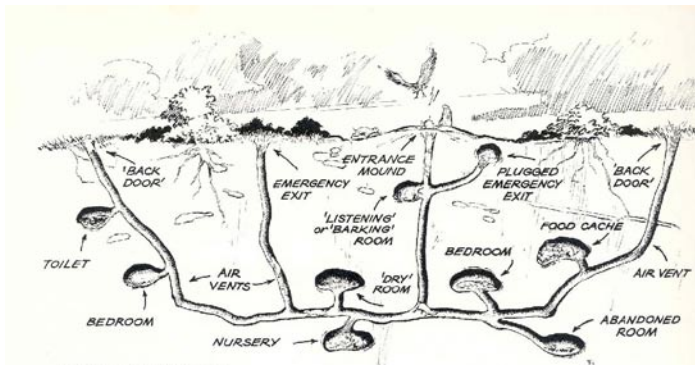
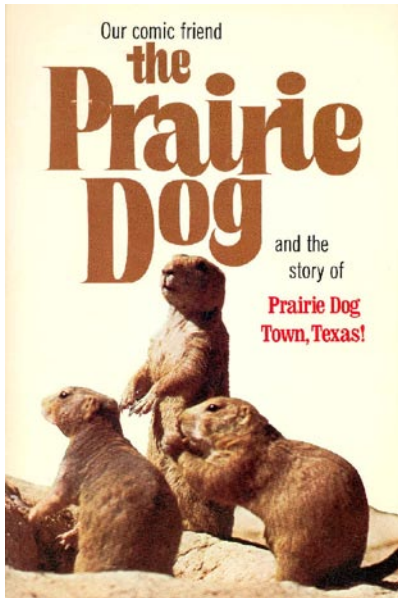
fill the opening with dirt, thus entombing the viper who wished he'd never thought up the idea in the first place.

The Western Species of the Burrowing Owl, *Speotyto cunicularia*, ranged over broad area of the western plains. It is built to burrow, with sharp "diggers" and long, ungainly legs. Yet, it prefers to take over abandoned burrows of the prairie dogs and, lacking these, of the badger, ground squirrel, armadillo and other ground dwelling mammals. It stands about 8 to 10 inches high, has a short, stubby, yet beautifully colored body, large, round head and enormous, yellow eyes. In Prairie Dog Town, Texas the dog owl breeds once a year, in April or May, and produces two white eggs which both parents help incubate. Its nest is located underground about six feet from the burrow entrance (probably in the old prairie dog "baking room") for protection from predators. At about 60 days, owl young are grown and either leave the nest or continue to help forage for the family.

The dog owl is considered to be the only bird that lives in a hole. And, while it is a boon to man because of its diet of mice, small insects, snakes and vermin, it is a pain in the neck to the prairie dog. The owl is a real wart, all right, but nature put it there for a reason. In times of danger, both the owl and the prairie dog may drive for the same burrow at the same time. This usually results in the owl being unceremoniously booted by the dog. Scorned, it just flies off to a nearby post or stump to await the "all-clear" signal. A remarkably gifted creature, the dog owl hunts both day and night, relying upon its super senses of sight and hearing. Unlike its unwitting landlord, the owl ranges far for its subsistence, flying in a characteristic, undulating manner.

The Burrowing Owls of Prairie Dog Town are fascinating to watch. Seemingly stupid, they are not. They are as curious as the dog and almost as amusing. A family of two adults and two young may be seen standing on their mound, chirping and nodding and bowing, Oriental fashion, to one another. While the owl in Mackenzie State Park is as protected as the prairie dog, its natural attachment to the dog in the wild is spelling its doom. Along with the threatened extinction of the prairie dog, so goes the dog owl. That is, unless it decides to get busy and dig its own hole!

# GRAPHICS from the Original Booklet



**PRAIRIE DOG BURROW**

The burrow is an ingeniously designed apartment and is occupied by one family. A vertical shaft descends for 12 to 20 feet, where it levels off into an L or T tunnel for another 10 to 15 feet. Other shafts provide air and lead to emergency exits. Branching off the burrow are one or more bedrooms, nursery, toilet, pantry, 'dry room', and

the 'listening' or 'barking' room. In case of flood, a plugged emergency exit provides an air pocket and a quick dig to freedom.

Dozens and even hundreds of these adjacent burrows make up a prairie dog town.



The entrance mound is the lookout tower, a refuge in time of danger, a protection from flood and fire, and the center of neighborhood activity.



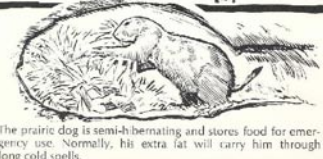
Long toenails, short forelegs and powerful rear 'kickers' make the prairie dog an expert digger.



The 'listening' or 'barking' room is the underground post of the sentry, where he listens for danger above and signals to those below.



The deluxe suite is the nursery, where the female raises once-a-year litter of four or five puppies.



The prairie dog is semi-hibernating and stores food for emergency use. Normally, his extra fat will carry him through long cold spells.



Each burrow is equipped with one or more well camouflaged 'secret' exits, just in case unwelcome guests drop by.