

Prairie Dogs

Prairie dogs are small mammals in the rodent family. Squirrels, mice, beavers, gerbils, chipmunks, and gophers are some of their cousins. They are all rodents, too. Rodents have two upper and two lower teeth that never stop growing. Rodents chew a lot, which helps to keep those teeth short.

Prairie dogs are sometimes called ground squirrels. They look like tree squirrels, without the fluffy tails, and they build their homes underground. Prairie dogs are the size of rabbits, with tan or golden-colored backs and white bellies. There are five kinds of prairie dog. The best known is the black-tailed.

Black-tailed prairie dogs live in "towns," big groups of up to hundreds of animals. Each town is made of underground passages that connect rooms together. Prairie dogs arrange the rooms to use for special purposes. The town has rooms for sleep, for storage, for babies, and even rooms used as toilets.

Each day, the young pups play while grown-ups work on the tunnels, watch out for attacks from other animals, and gather food. Prairie dogs eat mostly vegetable material like grasses, seeds, and roots.

In 1900, 800 million wild prairie dogs lived on the prairies and grasslands of the American West. Farmers and settlers considered them pests and got rid of most of them. Now there are only a few million left.

Today, the first place many kids see prairie dogs is at the zoo. Perhaps they are not as strange or mysterious as other zoo animals, like giraffes or gorillas. But prairie dogs are fun to watch. They pop in and out of their tunnels and scurry about. Visitors may even see two prairie dogs touch their front teeth together. This is a gentle motion. It is how the animals recognize each other. To humans, however, it often looks like a kiss!