

Prairie dogs

When visiting Wind cave, Custer state park, the Badlands, or Devil's Tower be sure to visit the prairie dog town. Chances are you will hear the chirping, whistling, and barking. Prairie dogs are social animals and communicate with each other using calls and body language. If you wait long enough you might see them standing erect and whistling. These prairie dogs are warning the other that their home may be under attack by coyote, hawk, snake, or ferret. Surveillance is increased for the prairie dog by reducing the grass height around the burrows to about 6 inches. Prairie dogs are not dogs but are rodents in the squirrel family. They live underground in tunnels and chambers. They come out during the day to forage on grasses, seeds, and roots. They live in towns, many with hundreds of prairie dogs. Most the time these towns cover less than half a square mile however, some towns have been enormous. One town in Texas extended 100 miles in one direction 250 miles in the other; 400 million prairie dogs were estimated to live in this one town.

Living in these burrows, one would think that the air would become stall. However upon closer observation, we see that the burrow shape creates ventilation. Prairie dogs build their mounds in such a way that air moves. Typically there are two openings. When a breeze crosses the mounds, air enters the burrow through the lower mound and leaves through the higher mound. God has created prairie dogs with the instinct to build one mound higher than the other mound. This creates a draft or chimney effect which draws fresh air into the tunnel and allows it to circulate throughout. So during the summer, the tunnels have "air conditioning". When the temperatures exceed 100 F. on the outside with the soil surface temperature reaching about 113 degrees F. the burrow temperature one foot below was a comfortable 74 degrees. During the winter, the snow covers the "chimney", not allowing the cold air to enter the tunnels.

