

THE AMERICAN BIOLOGY TEACHER



About Our Cover

This black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*) was keeping guard of his family group or coterie on the edge of Rocky Mountain National Park near Estes Park, Colorado. Black-tailed prairie dogs are very social animals. They are typically active during the day and live in large colonies, which are broken down into smaller “neighborhoods” and family groups. A coterie or family group is generally composed of a male with one to four females and their offspring younger than two years of age. As mentioned they are a very social animal, typically welcoming each other by touching noses.

Black-tailed prairie dogs are burrowing rodents that are a member of the squirrel family and closely related to ground squirrels. Their adult length is ca. 38 centimeters, including their 6-centimeter black-tipped tail. But unlike other species within their genus, *Cynomys ludovicianus* do not hibernate.

Prairie dogs were historically thought to have covered seven million acres in Colorado, usually residing at altitudes below 6,000 feet. Their overall decline has come as a result of loss of habitat from agricultural land use habitat fragmentation, and sylvatic plague. At one time their range stretched from northern Chihuahua, Mexico, to southern Saskatchewan. The prairie dog’s range now includes Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wyoming.

This photo was taken during a hike into Rocky Mountain National Park by Nancy L. Elwess (Distinguished Teaching Professor, Department of Biological Sciences, State University of New York at Plattsburgh) using a Nikon Coolpix P900, focal length 321 mm, f6.3, 1/800 sec.

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