

LEVELED BOOK • M

A Prairie Dog's Life



Written by Julie Mettenburg

www.readinga-z.com

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Meet a black-tailed prairie dog.

The Big Day

Spring has come to the **prairie**.
Today, Charlie will go outside for
the first time. Charlie has lived his
first few months below ground.

Charlie is a black-tailed prairie dog.
But is he really a dog?

No! Prairie dogs are actually
squirrels, part of the rodent family.

Pioneers named the prairie dog because they thought the animal's call sounded like a dog's bark.

Charlie loves his warm, cozy **burrow**, but he wants to go outside. Lucky Charlie! Today his mother will take him and his three sisters above ground. They will learn about the big world outside.



Prairie dogs kiss to find out if they live in the same place.



Squirrel



Prairie dog



Guinea pig

Welcome to the **Prairie**

The “prairie” part of Charlie’s name comes from his **habitat**. All of the world’s grasslands, or prairies, have burrowing **mammals** that create underground homes. In the United States, that animal is the prairie dog.

When he is grown, Charlie will weigh 1.5 to 3 pounds (0.68-1.36 kg). Standing on his rear feet, he will be about 1 foot tall (30.48 cm). That is about the size of a large squirrel or a guinea pig.

There are five types of prairie dog. They are the Gunnison's, black-tailed, white-tailed, Mexican, and Utah prairie dogs. The black-tailed are the most common, living on lowland prairies.



Gunnison's



Black-tailed



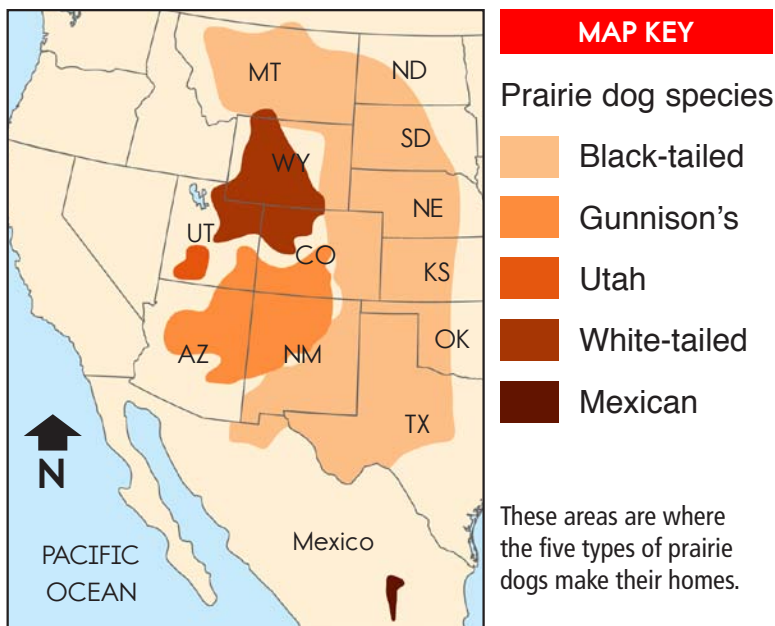
Utah



Mexican



White-tailed



Home Below Ground

Charlie's underground home is called a **coterie** (KOH-tur-ee). Each family has its own small coterie, a hole that is made up of small "rooms."

Many coterie together make a prairie dog **colony**. One colony can spread for hundreds of miles and house thousands of dogs!

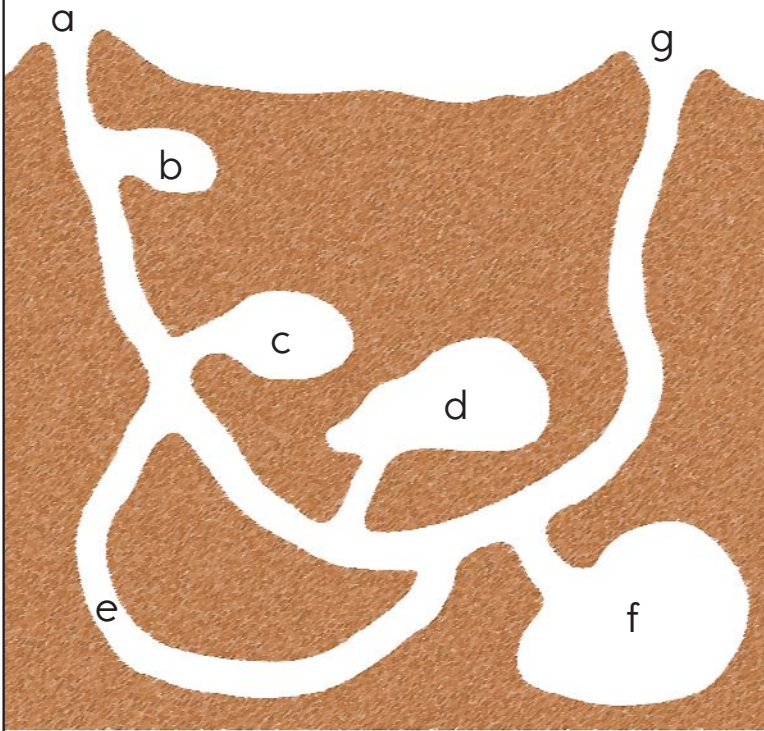
Charlie and his sisters poke their noses outside their burrow. The sun is so bright compared to the dark underground.

But it is wonderful! They climb out of their burrow and over the mound of dirt at its opening. All around them is short prairie grass and plants.



A prairie dog peeks out of its burrow.

Charlie's Underground Home



a) main mound

b) listening post

c) toilet

d) "dry room"
for floods

e) loop

f) "nursery" for
babies

g) second entrance

Do You Know?

One prairie dog colony in western Texas grew to be 100 miles wide and 250 miles long (161 km by 402 km). It was estimated that 400 million prairie dogs lived there.

Danger!

Charlie and his sisters begin to explore. Before long, a prairie dog's sharp bark cuts through the air.

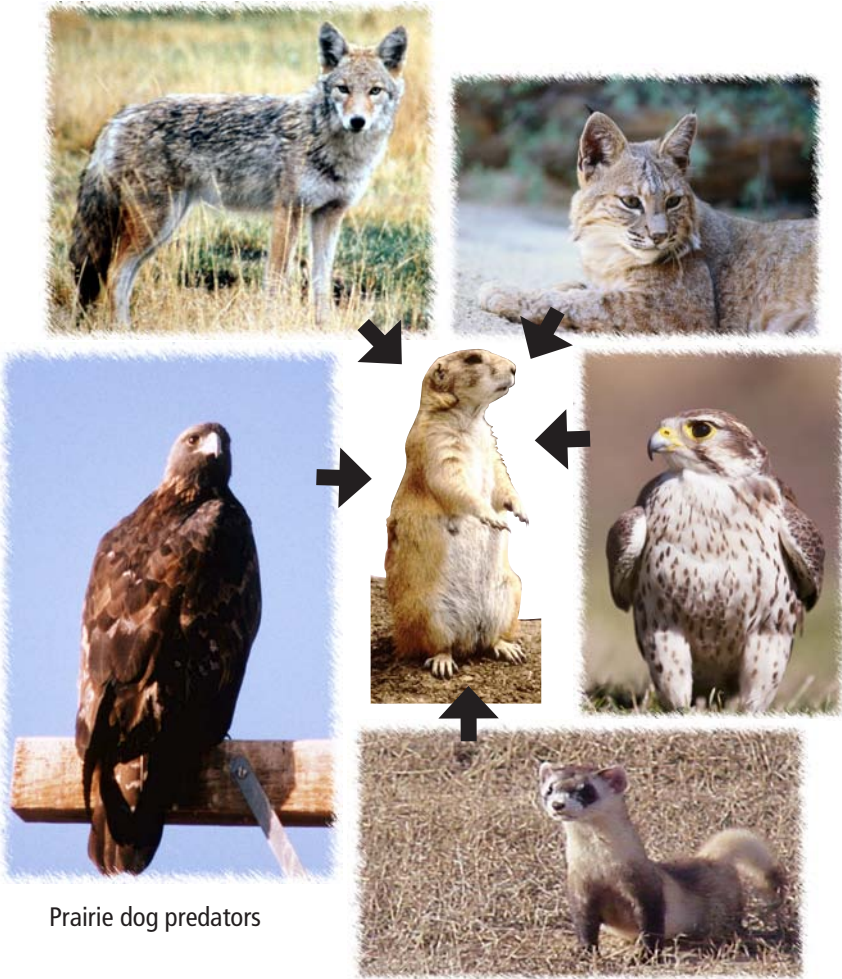
"Yee-ipp!" he shouts with a hop.
He has spotted danger!

"Yee-ipp!" Charlie's father replies.

All of the prairie dogs stand tall, alert. Even though there is danger, they stay. The dogs will stay very still and watch until the danger goes away.



A prairie dog stands alert to danger.



Prairie dog predators

What might the danger be? Many **predators** hunt prairie dogs. Predators include coyotes, bobcats, prairie falcons, black-footed ferrets, and golden eagles.

Perhaps the biggest danger of all is humans. Some people think prairie dogs destroy the land. These people try to harm prairie dogs by destroying their homes or killing them.

Other people believe prairie dogs are important because their burrows bring air and water to the soil. Burrows also provide hiding places for other animals to escape predators.



A weasel pokes its head out of a prairie dog burrow.



Prairie dogs play and eat around this mound entrance to a burrow.

Summertime for Charlie

Not all yips and barks signal danger. Some yips or barks signal a prairie dog is lonely or upset. Now Charlie hears more yips and barks from the older prairie dogs that signal it is safe. The threat is gone.

Charlie and his sisters like playing outside in the sun. They will spend most of their summer outside.

As summer turns to fall, they will prepare their burrow for winter. During winter, they will rarely go out into the harsh weather.

Early next spring, the older females will have babies. And in late spring, Charlie will be an adult male. He will share in the watchdog duties. He will probably start a family and build his own coterie.



Baby prairie dogs stay in their burrow until they're old enough to go outside.

Glossary

burrow	a hole dug in the ground by an animal (p. 5)
colony	group of animals living together (p. 8)
coterie	the home of a family of prairie dogs (p. 8)
habitat	the natural environment of a plant or animal (p. 6)
mammals	warm-blooded animals that have hair (p. 6)
pioneers	first non natives to settle in the western United States (p. 5)
prairie	flat, grassy land (p. 4)
predators	animals that eat other animals (p. 12)

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