

Research uncovers startling Jekyll-and-Hyde behavior of gentle-looking prairie dog

By BARBARA S. MOFFET
National Geographic News Service

Dr. John Hoogland has spent seven seasons spying on prairie dogs and he's



Researchers are discovering that this innocent-looking rodent with the stuffed-animal features has more in common with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde than with cuddly teddy bears on a department store shelf.

brimming over with gossip: Did you know that some female prairie dogs are promiscuous? Or that the average male prairie dog has two or three females he calls his own? And that these seemingly affectionate, congenial animals sometimes turn around and kill each other, possibly their own relatives?

Unlike most gossip, these tidbits are based on thorough research — thousands of hours of watching at a 16-acre black-tailed prairie-dog colony at Wind Cave National Park in South Dakota. But his is news that not everyone relates to, Hoogland said, because many people don't even know the nature of the beast. Some think it's a dog.

"People in the East don't know a prairie dog from a coyote," said Hoogland, 31, an assistant professor at Princeton University.

Once he explains that prairie dogs are actually squirrels — relatives of the chipmunk, tree squirrel and groundhog — people tend to dismiss them as mere rodents.

HOOGLAND hadn't expected rodents to be so complex. He knew before beginning the study that prairie dogs are among the most social mammals, living together by the thousands in colonies that can cover hundreds of acres on the Great Plains. Their colonies or

towns are extremely organized, divided into wards and then into family units called coteries. Each coterie has a male, few females and some babies.

He learned that prairie dogs constructed elaborate burrows to live in — labyrinthine dwellings with a chamber for almost every occasion. Using their paws and noses to pile up dirt, they add two dome-shaped doors to each burrow, one a bit higher than the other to enhance ventilation.

A few minutes' observation revealed prairie dogs to be winsome animals, spending their days passively munching on grass around their burrows and chasing each other like kittens. Sometimes they even "kissed," a greeting that apparently is a sign of affection.

And they exhibited a whole range of sounds, from the so-called bark they

uttered when alarmed, to the "jump-yip," a high pitched, two-toned cry emitted with head thrown back and front paws in the air. They often seemed to jump-yip for no reason, one usually followed by a response from another prairie dog until there was a chorus of jump-yipping.

Hoogland even had a hint of prairie-dog hostility — occasional savage fighting and something called the anal display. In this behavior, which often occurs when a prairie dog intrudes in a foreign coterie, the agitated animal's tail flares, its anal glands inflame and its teeth chatter loudly.

BUT AFTER so many seasons of observing a colony of 200 animals, each one marked with a dyed number for identification, Hoogland has found that prairie dogs live by a well-defined social code he had not imagined. His research is supported by the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation.

He has concluded, for instance, that they are strongly nepotistic, looking out for their own relatives but apathetic about the fate of the prairie dogs in the next-door coterie.

During the Feb. 15 to April 15 breeding season, Hoogland and his assistants arrive in the field about 7 a.m., before the animals get up. They quietly ascend observation towers, where they might spend a 12-hour day huddled in sleeping bags, clutched binoculars and waiting

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for a sign that the animals are mating. To make sure their mating records are accurate, Hoogland is having the babies' blood samples analyzed. "We're using blood samples like a lawyer would for paternity exclusion," he said. Most of the samples analyzed so far by a New York laboratory have verified the team's data, he said.

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"If this actually happened, it would pull the rug out from under my theories," he said. "Here are these females that are cooperating, defending territory together, building nests together and eating together for 364 days a year, and then a female goes off in the grass and her mother or sister goes down and kills her pups."

Infanticide, he said, is known to occur in many species, including prairie dogs, but the killing of relatives is rare. Until he has more evidence, though, Hoogland's not making any definite statements about what might be the darker side of the prairie dog.

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