



Prairie Dogs

Description and habitat

The most common prairie dog in Thornton is the Black-Tailed Prairie Dog. These are the little tan animals commonly seen in short grass fields throughout the city. These rodents typically weigh from 1-3 pounds, and can range from 14-20 inches in length. The entryway to their burrow is a volcano-shaped hole, which helps to keep water out of the burrow and provide air in the burrow when there is wind.

Behavior

Prairie dogs are large ground squirrels (not really dogs) that are known to “bark” as a form of communication with the colony. They will “bark” to warn the colony of danger, to notify the colony that an enemy is gone, and to deter an enemy from approaching them.

Although they do not hibernate, prairie dogs will stay in their dens for days at a time during cold winter months. They will wander out of their dens during warmer days in the winter to search for food and water. Prairie dogs are only active during daylight

hours. They mate in late February to April, have a 34 day gestation period, and bear 3-4 young. They only have one litter per year.

Benefits

After a prairie dog has abandoned its burrow, other wildlife such as snakes, owls and rabbits can use the burrow for a new home. They are a key food source for many other species such as hawks, snakes, foxes, and coyotes.

Common Problems and Solutions

A prairie dog has fallen into a window well

Place a board with a rough surface down into the window well at an angle for them to climb out on. Prairie dogs are excellent diggers (they can dig a burrow up to 7 feet deep and 16 feet long), and they may start to dig their way out of the well if no other option presents itself, but they don't always make it out.

A prairie dog is in my garage

Although they are not known for their “smarts,” if you are able to leave the garage open for some time, they will eventually go out on their own. If there is a lot of debris and places for the prairie dog to hide, you may have to move things around.

A prairie dog is in my yard

Usually in late spring to early summer the colonies will start to produce their young. If the colony becomes too large there may be some prairie dogs that get “kicked out” of the colony. If you see them in your yard or in the neighborhood it’s a good chance they are in search of a new colony. The best thing to do is leave them alone. If they are in a fenced backyard, opening the gate can provide a good escape route for them. Be mindful of your own dogs if you have any, and be sure to put your dog on a leash while the gate is open. Also if there are any children in the home make sure they do not corner the prairie dog, as they could be bitten if they attempt to touch it. Looking from a distance is always the safest way to see wild animals.



Preventing prairie dogs from moving into your yard

Attempting to reduce the size of a colony is very difficult, and in some cases can be very costly. The best solution is to prevent them from moving into a specific area. If your home sits next to a colony, the best thing to do is provide visual barriers. Prairie dogs live in open spaces due to the high level of visibility the area provides. Vinyl barrier fencing or slatted privacy fencing are good options for home owners. Other options include thick shrubs or fast growing sturdy trees. Regardless of the method used for a barrier, it’s best to keep in mind that prairie dogs are excellent diggers. To prevent them from digging holes into your yard make sure that all barriers are set into the ground 18-24 inches. You can also try putting out artificial natural predators, such as a hawk or owl.