

EXPLORE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM. LEARN INSIDE OUR STATE.

Talking Dogs

Curecanti National Recreation Area

Background: Curecanti National Recreation Area includes three reservoirs along the Gunnison River which are great for salmon and trout fishing. Curecanti is also home to remarkable wildlife, including the prairie dog which is a type of ground squirrel. There are five different species of prairie dogs in North America, one of them being the Gunnison prairie dog. Besides human beings, prairie dogs may have the most sophisticated vocal communication of all animals, including dolphins and whales.

[Watch this video](#) to learn more about the Gunnison Prairie Dogs language.

Stop at the Elk Creek Visitor Center to get the Jr. Ranger book and a map. Find the Cooper Ranch area on the map and head there. Once there you will find picnic tables, restrooms, a short hiking trail and river access. You will also find a wayside sign, "They're Talking About You".

Word Alert:

Decoding—analyzing and interpreting communication, both verbal or nonverbal

Nonverbal—not using words or speech

Questions to Ask:

1. Name ways that humans communicate? (*talking, writing, nonverbally by body language*)
2. How can humans communicate if they're happy? (voice changes, maybe they smile)
3. How do dogs communicate with us? (they wag their tails, bark, lick, etc)
4. What are some other ways animals communicate? (*answers will vary but some possibilities are, dog with back fur up tells us he's scared or on alert, cat rubbing up against legs may tell us she wants to cuddle*)
5. What are some ways you think prairie dogs communicate? (*jumping, noses twitching, different sounds*)

Activity: You will be observing the Gunnison Prairie Dog at “Cooper Ranch” area, listening to the sounds they make, as well as watching their behaviors.

Find a prairie dog and be very still while you observe them. Listen to the sounds they make and watch for movement. Write your observations on the chart. Next, make a movement, either take a step forward or wave your arms. Did the prairie dog change its behaviour or make different sounds? Record your observations by drawing or writing them. Finally, make a barking noise and record the prairie dogs' behaviour.

Make sure to stay where the signs tell you to stay. Remember these are wild animals and we want to protect both you and them!

Your activity	What do you see?	What you hear?	What do you think they are communicating?
Sitting/ Standing still			
Moving (again stay a safe distance)			
Make a barking noise.			

What do you know about prairie dogs that you didn't know before?

Interesting Fact: Lewis and Clark on the Corps of Discovery Expedition were fascinated with the prairie dogs in what is now North Dakota and sent a live one back to President Jefferson, as well as other items.