

PREDATOR-SPECIFIC WORDS IN PRAIRIE DOG
ALARM CALLS. C. N. Slobodchikoff,
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Gunnison's prairie dogs (Cynomys gunnisoni) have predator-specific alarm calls that distinguish between dogs, humans, hawks, coyotes, and several other species of predators. Within a predator-specific call, e.g., that for humans, the prairie dogs have descriptors that reliably identify each individual they encounter. Each individual prairie dog has its own vocal characteristics, suggesting that there is an element of individual recognition involved as to which animal is alarm calling. Experiments with predators that are totally unfamiliar to the prairie dogs show that these predators are apparently classified in a generalized group of "unfamiliar" animals, regardless of whether the unfamiliar animals are terrestrial or aerial predators. Under these conditions, however, each species of unfamiliar predator is given a call that is significantly different from calls for all other species. These results suggest that prairie dogs may have a rudimentary form of an abstract language.