Suggested for grades K-5

Hanging Out on the Short Grass Prairie

Objective:

Students will be able to: 1) better understand the dynamics of a prairie dog town in the short grass prairie ecosystem, 2) identify and recognize some rare species found on the short grass prairie.

Method:

As an introduction to the unit, students read about animals found on the short grass prairie, including:
-prairie dogs
-bison
-black-footed ferrets
-swift foxes
-spotted skunks
-mountain plovers
-ferruginous hawks
-Texas horned lizards
-rattlesnakes
-rodents

Student construct mobiles that will serve as a backdrop for further learning about the short grass prairie.

Background:

If left uneaten, the short grass prairie would never get very tall (unlike the mid/tall grass prairies). Over the last 100 years, approximately 50% of the historic short grass prairie has been converted for uses other than rangeland. Some of the rangeland that remains no longer supports native grasses or prairie dog towns.

Prairie dogs are found mostly on the short grass prairies. Prairie dog colonies are unique patches of habitat that attract a wide variety of wildlife. At one time, vast prairie dog towns covered large areas of the Texas Panhandle. Now, less than one percent of these communities remain, widely spaced and scattered.

Materials:

Photo copied pictures of animals on the short grass prairie, construction paper, glue, string, scissors, and markers.

Procedure:

1. Give the students time to read about and color the pictures of the animals that live on the short grass prairie.

2. Cut out the pictures and text descriptions.

3. Mount and label the animals and prairie dog town model on construction paper. Glue the information sentences on the back of the pictures. Hang the animals from the model of the prairie dog town.

4. Finally, suspend the mobiles from the ceiling. Loop the prairie dog town base around and fasten so that the mobile hangs in a circle. The students could add other inhabitants of the short grass prairie to their mobiles, including: badgers, weasels, coyotes, bobcats, foxes, hawks, eagles, rabbits, rattlesnakes, bull snakes, deer mice, kangaroo rats, meadow larks, burrowing owls, buffalo grass, grama grass, livestock, and humans.

I'm a Prairie Dog. I eat the grasses on the short grass prairie. My burrows are home to many other animals.

I'm a Bison. I graze on the short grass prairie in and around prairie dog towns.

I'm a Black-footed Ferret. I depend on large, healthy prairie dog towns for both food and shelter.

I'm a Swift Fox. I eat prairie dogs, ground squirrels, rabbits and birds on the short grass prairie.

I'm a Spotted Skunk. I use prairie dog burrows as a home and eat mice and bird eggs on the short grass prairie.

I'm a Mountain Plover. I nest where the grass is grazed short by prairie dogs. I eat insects kicked up by herds of bison and cattle.

I'm a Ferriginous Hawk. I eat small mammals including prairie dogs, ground squirrels, and rabbits on the short grass prairie.

I'm a Texas Horned Lizard. I can be found in many parts of Texas. On the short grass prairie, I escape the hot summer months by hiding in prairie dog burrows. I come out when it is cool to eat ants.

I'm a Cottontail Rabbit. I make my home in vacant prairie dog burrows on the prairie.

I'm a Burrowing Owl. I nest in abandoned prairie dog burrows and perch on the mounds in search of insects and mice.

I'm a Rattlesnake. I rest in cool prairie dog burrows during the day and move through the town at night in search of food.

I'm a Meadow Lark. I nest around prairie dog towns to collect insects and seeds from the short grasses.