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Hands on learning style Students measure prairie-dog town

Hanaba Munn Noack, Times Record News

CHILDRESS, Texas -- "Hands on" learning is the way **Russell Graves** teaches agriculture at Childress High School -- but it doesn't quite work for prairie dogs.

Graves' students have a better chance of grabbing slippery fish from the big tank that sits in the corner of their classroom than getting their hands on any of the prairie dogs that inhabit the prairie dog town a few miles north of the school.

But the elusive nature of the prairie dogs hasn't daunted Graves or his students. Shy or not, prairie dogs are part of Graves' wildlife curriculum. Their town near the school is the subject of a continuing on-site study that Graves and his students expect to carry from year to year.

Never mind that the little creatures hardly stick their heads above ground whenever the students arrive. The town itself is what Graves' students have examined closely this year. They've noted its intricacies and have measured it from one hole to the next. Also, they've taken soil samples to see if prairie dogs change the characteristics of the soil in areas where they burrow.

"He likes wildlife stuff," said David Rothwell, one of Graves' students.

Graves, in fact, not only studies wildlife -- he photographs all sorts of animals in the wilds of West Texas. He's been published in Texas Highways and other publications.

"We never get bored," said Emily Robertson, another student. "That's for sure."

Expecting the unexpected is what his classes have learned to do.

"I wasn't expecting to get to go out to a prairie dog town just a few miles from here," Rothwell said, as he left the school for the short ride to the prairie dog town -- a bald spot in a pasture owned by local attorney Richard Bird.

Bird said the prairie dogs were well entrenched at the location when he bought the property.

"I've owned it for close to 40 years," he said.

When Bird bought the land, he didn't consider the prairie dogs a plus -- and probably still doesn't.

"We tried to get rid of them," he said. "Horses would step into their holes."

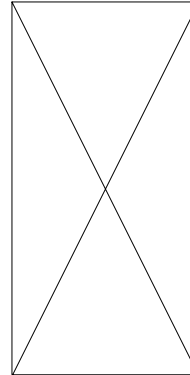
Bird has since given up on exterminating the colony. He gave his blessing to Graves' plan to turn the prairie dog town into a school project.

The length of time the prairie dogs have inhabited the location is a question that remains unanswered.

"That one could have been there for no telling how long," said ag student Jim

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The size of the town is 12.91 acres, according to the students' measurements this year. They'll measure it again next year to see if it grows or shrinks.

And by next year, the private lives of the prairie dogs will likely be part of the study -- not that the students will have any better luck at getting their hands on the wary critters or even seeing them above ground. The plan is to use fiber optic technology to spy in their holes.

"If we don't get it this year . . . we'll get it started before next year," said Christopher Carroll, another student.

Regional Staff Writer Hanaba Munn Noack can be reached at (940) 763-7554 or (800) 627-1646, Ext. 554, or with e-mail at hanaba@chipshot.net. Childress High School students measure the size of a prairie dog town north of Childress. They are, from left, Josh Harris, Christopher Carroll, Emily Robertson, Jim Self, April Beasley and Teri Vanlandingham.

Hanaba Munn Noack TRN

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