

Prairie dog expert shares tips for staying warm in the cold

BY AMY PELSINSKY

John Hoogland is an expert on staying warm in cold weather. For 40 years, he has spent upwards of 12 hours a day sitting in a tower to observe the intimate lives of prairie dogs during mating season. From dawn to dusk, during frigid months in late winter and early spring, in the remotest reaches and highest altitudes of the American West.

"It's well below freezing when we get there at dawn. Some days it never gets out of the 20s," he says. "More commonly it gets into the 30s and 40s by about noon – and then back into the teens by the time the prairie dogs finish their courtship at the end of the day," he said.

A behavioral ecologist with the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science, Hoogland has spent a lifetime unlocking the secrets of prairie dog society, spending six months out of the year observing their fascinating behavior—often an insight into our own—come wind, snow, sleet, and rain. In short, he knows how to dress for the weather.

So what is the key to staying warm? "Layers, layers, and more layers," he says.

But not just any layers.

"I wear eight layers on the bottom—underwear, long underwear, more long underwear, trousers, snowmobile trousers. On the top, I'm at eleven layers. Medium size shirt to start, and then I go to a few larges, then extra larges, and then XXLs—all long-sleeve. Then two hooded XXL sweatshirts."

Hoogland finishes with a wool hat underneath the two hoods. Plus crack-and-heat hand warmers inside his 2 pairs of gloves, toe warmers between two layers of socks, boots rated at -40 degrees, and a sleeping bag to wrap around the legs while sitting in the tower.

"It takes me about 20 minutes to get dressed in the morning," he says. "And I have to get all those layers in the right order. Otherwise, it's a mess."

"I worry about getting as many layers as I can and still move. We need to be able to write and put up our binoculars and move 360 degrees while sitting all day. If we move around too much we spook the prairie dogs."

His "scare" letter to potential field assistants details the tough conditions to be expected, including a warning that "insatiable curiosity and unwavering enthusiasm are pivotal to our survival during the prairie dog mating season in early spring." Only one out of four students who receive the letter still wants to come. "If you can't handle the cold, you don't want to work with John Hoogland," he warns.



Hoogland and his assistants can spend up to 13 hours a day outside overswing prairie dogs behavior.



Behavioral ecologist John Hoogland releases a prairie dog back into the colony after marking it for identification.

But it's not all about long underwear and a corner on long-sleeve t-shirts. Something else warms Hoogland's heart.

"The most important ingredient—more important than all those layers—is you've just got to have a passion for figuring out who's mating with whom. When you have that passion, you don't even notice the cold," he says.

"It's so exciting—four or five females sexually receptive on the same afternoon, titanic battles among the males vying for the females' attention, coyotes stalking and eagles diving for vulnerable prairie dogs obsessed with sex. It's riveting, and the nonstop drama makes it possible for me to endure the arctic conditions when the prairie dogs are mating."

"One day in a tower watching prairie dogs during mating season will change your life forever," Hoogland says.