

## **TRANSCRIPT**

**INTERVIEWEE:** Russell Graves

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

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**Russell Graves** [00:00:01] Were earlier estimates of the, of the, of the species, correct? I mean, once they kind of figured out how many there were, were those models they used to estimate them even right? And so if they're right about an obscure species like the dune sagebrush lizard, if they were incorrect about an obscure species like the dune sagebrush lizard, it wouldn't surprise me to know that they were incorrect about the black-tailed prairie dog as well.

**Russell Graves** [00:00:27] And, you know, here's the thing: when you, when you look at the, if you're being fair about it, when you look at the report of the 250-mile wide by 100-mile long prairie dog town. That was undoubtedly not one single town in a collection of towns, and who knows? Because, as I recall, it doesn't say anything, in the account I read, about, you know, it may be my 21st century brain will allow me to think this way, but I can't imagine a prairie dog town that big. It's undoubtedly a collection of towns that that just happened to be the range of where they stretch to. And it wasn't just a continuous town from where San Angelo sits now all the way to where Clarendon, Texas is now. It just doesn't seem practical to me.

**David Todd** [00:01:17] I see. So it could be that that was their range, but it wasn't as dense - that there were, there were gaps and ...

**Russell Graves** [00:01:24] Yeah.

**David Todd** [00:01:24] Openings within and among the, the colonies in those prairie dog towns. Interesting.

**Russell Graves** [00:01:31] And too, I think, from, from just from a historical and human perspective as well, and look, I don't want to paint those guys who did the historical work as bad guys, I'm not. I mean, you know, if, throughout history, I think there's plenty of, plenty of people who just do the best they can to describe something. I mean, I think, you know, I've had this conversation with people before. When you look at the Holy Bible and I believe, you know, full disclosure, I'm a Christian and I believe in the Bible. But I think some of the things in the Bible, especially the way the Earth was created, was, you know, it said it was created in seven days. I think there's room for the scientific argument that it took longer than seven days to create. But I think it fits in well with the, with the biblical

narrative, too, that was created in seven days. I just don't think that the people, because the Bible's, was a holy document that was inspired by a holy Being, but it was still written by people, and I don't think that those people may have had the linguistic or the vocabulary capacity to come up with a word to describe the eons other than, "Well, OK, it took a day."

**Russell Graves** [00:02:48] I think you take that same perspective, and, you know, when people used to describe the Earth and tried to make sense of the Earth. Well, for the longest, they thought it was flat, and that's the only way they could think to describe it. And then when it, you know, and you take that same sort of logic to a species like the prairie dog and trying to come up with their estimate, I think the people there probably undoubtedly just used the, the best knowledge they had in their mind at the time to describe whatever it is they were trying to describe, whether it's the size of a prairie dog town or something other, else in nature they were finding, to describe what it looked like. And probably a generous sense of hyperbole thrown in there as well, because you look at accounts of buffalo and you'll, you'll see people, right, that are still quoted today that, you know, the buffalo herd was so big that you could walk 30 miles across them on their back, on their backs without ever touching the ground. Well I don't quite believe that. But that's just the only way they knew to describe it.

**Russell Graves** [00:03:51] And I think today you can argue the same thing. As enlightened as we think we are, there's most of the things that we don't know, particularly in the natural world. There's a ton of things we don't know. And I think the way that I used to describe things today, and the million words I've had published in my lifetime, I think all the things that I've written a hundred years now, can be looked back on, and think you know, what was he thinking? We know so much more now than we did then. And so I think that's true through out every phase in human history.

**David Todd** [00:04:22] Yeah, that that seems like a very honest and humble way to look at it. You know, sometimes we just don't have the knowledge or the imagination to quite understand what's real.

**David Todd** [00:04:37] You know, I'd like to to go back to some something about these prairie dogs because you, I think you've, you've looked at them and thought about them so much more than most. And one thing I was curious about is that it sounds like these prairie dogs have benefits for their part of the world that maybe weren't really expecting. I think I read in your book about, you know, issues of infiltration and water retention and nutrient levels and controlling hardwoods like mesquites. And are there any true examples of those kind of benefits from prairie dogs that people might not anticipate?

**Russell Graves** [00:05:33] You know, I really think as much as anything is just the, well, actually, two things. You know, you drive, you're going 75 miles an hour down the highway, and you look out at a prairie dog and it looks barren. I think it surprises a lot of people once you just, you go somewhere, not a place like McKenzie Park in Lubbock, that's sort of an artificial sort of habitat where they have prairie dogs there. But if you go somewhere like the Wichita Mountain National Wildlife Refuge near Lawton, Oklahoma, where they have just, just a wild prairie dog town, and those prairie dogs are habituated to people in the

sense that you can sit there and observe them for a long time. I think it really surprises people to see how much, how much life is going on in and around those prairie dog towns. I think that's, that's one thing that will surprise people.

**Russell Graves** [00:06:23] And I think too, just the fact that, you know, when you, or when we looked at, it surprised me when we looked at the forage quality of the, of, of the grass in the prairie dog town, because, you know, I'll take one species in particular like buffalo grass, for example, which is a common forage grass that's short grass that grows all over all of the Texas Rolling Plains and the High Plains. When you take a grass like that, that's palatable to livestock and, you know, livestock, meaning not only cattle, but at one time, bison, and so what happens when you go outside and you cut your grass every day. Or what happens when you go outside and you cut your grass? Grass is going to grow back, right? And because of that, it is always in a state of regeneration. It's always growing. Well, it's putting all the nutrients it gets from the soil in, you know, it's, it's doing what grass does, and that's turning sunlight into energy and then that energy is being transferred to the animal.

**Russell Graves** [00:07:24] I think once people understand that cycle and how prairie dogs influence that cycle of just grass growing and then regenerating in that constant state of regeneration, which makes it a higher quality forage for, for the animals that would graze on it, I think, I think that part surprises people too to learn. But it's just, it's, it's, I'm not a botanist, but as I understand botany and understand how photosynthesis works and, and all those natural mechanisms of how, how the, the grand mechanism of how plants take water and are able to extract nutrients from the soil and transfer those nutrients up into the leaves and then living, you know, mammals can eat that grass and then turn that grass into energy and flesh for their bodies. And how that whole, just the miracle of how the sun and the plants and the soil and the microbes in the soil and the bugs in the soil, which, by the way, because of prairie dogs constantly disturbing the soil, it becomes more conducive for, for microorganisms and the, and the microorganism community within the, within the soil, as well as just, just the bigger stuff you can see like bugs and how it influences the whole ecosystem. And again makes that, makes that big food cycle work - changing energy into, or sunlight into plant energy, into animal energy, and then then it brings all the predators in and is able to, to transfer the energy to another, another type of life.

**Russell Graves** [00:09:03] And it's just a, it's a miraculous cycle that, you know, I think people, when they take time to really understand how that works and how prairie dogs are a part of that cycle, I think once they understand that, it just kind of paints them all in a brand new light.

**David Todd** [00:09:19] Yeah. Well, and you know, I think you, you've really mastered the art of shining a light on these animals. And I think for a lot of people's day-to-day experience, they're driving, as you said, 75 miles an hour down the freeway, and they may not appreciate how the dynamic on these prairie towns, prairie dog towns are. And so I was curious how, you know, after doing your research with your students, you managed to persuade folks at Texas Tech Press to accept your submission of a manuscript and, and

publish this book, "Prairie Dog: Sentinel of the Prairie". I mean, how, how did you get them to see things, with the value that you had observed?

**Russell Graves** [00:10:16] Well, it wasn't easy. I'll tell you that one thing that. You know, really, it's kind of one of those stories of, "What came first, the chicken or the egg?" And in this case, I was looking at all my pictures, and I realized one day that I may have, I'm not going to say the best, but I've got a pretty good collection of prairie dog images. And this is back in the day when we were shooting all these pictures on slides. It wasn't, you know, digital photography was in its infancy. And it's not like I had a ton of pictures of prairie dogs, I mean, they were all on slides. But I just, inherently, were looking at them, I thought I saw value in that and saw value in telling the story.

**Russell Graves** [00:10:56] And about that time is when we started doing the research on prairie dogs with the school and, and really, I was starting to what I felt like, at least from my paradigm, I was understanding the bigger story and the bigger ecological story behind the prairie dog. And so there's a book that came out about the same time by Wyman Meinzer, or a little bit earlier than that, a couple of books actually, by Wyman Meinzer. One is about the roadrunner and the other one is about the coyote, and Texas Tech University published it.

**Russell Graves** [00:11:26] And so I inquired of them about, hey, are you all looking to do any more books on kind of western Texas species that are, you know, even though roadrunners and coyotes are found all over the state, you know, they're kind of, at least in popular imagination, they're a kind of a Western species. I think a lot of that is because of the, the, the old Looney Tunes cartoon with the coyote and the roadrunner. And so you think of them being in open vast spaces, which was the Rolling Plains and the, and the High Plains of Texas.

**Russell Graves** [00:11:58] And so I asked them that and they said, "Yeah, what do you got in mind?" And this was, this was, this wasn't over a phone call, and I'm distilling the conversation down. But this is, you know, email correspondences because that time email had come of age. And so, you know, they had a standard where you, you would propose a, a book idea. And I, and I followed their format and filled out, you know, did a proposal to do this book. And they said, "Yeah, let's do it." And so I got a contract to write the book and wrote the book and spent about the next year doing more pictures of the prairie dog. And the rubber meets the road when it came to the review process. And that's when, that's when it, I was forced to be a little tougher. Because at that point, what I was trying to do was, you know, I'm 30 years old writing this book and trying to act like I'm an expert on prairie dogs. And then I found out pretty quick when they sent out the review process. And this is one of the things that we really had to come to grips on.

**Russell Graves** [00:13:01] And this is one of the things professionally that I really had to stand my ground a little bit because they sent it out to a reviewer who was a (I won't name his name, because I don't want anyone to think I'm picking on the guy, have a lot of respect for him), but they sent out this review to a reviewer who looked at my manuscript, my 20,000-word manuscript like it was a doctoral thesis. And I got that manuscript back. I

think I've still got it in my files somewhere. There was so much red on that thing and just, and I finally had to come back to them and say, "You know, I never pretended to be a scientist. You all knew that going in. I was just writing kind of a general, easy-to-read account, kind of an armchair naturalist version of the prairie dog. I mean, everything in there is right. It may not be cited and annotated like I'm trying to defend a doctoral thesis, but there's, there's, there's no wrong information in there, at the time." There may be now, you may go back through because 20 years has passed. You may go back through and find some inconsistencies. But at the time I just told them, "I'll stand on what it says. You know, maybe I didn't write it like a, like a, like a scientific journal or a scientific article in Nature journal would be, where, you know, I put, I put citations behind every sentence", I said. But I was writing it like an extended magazine story because this book is not going to be for other scientists. It's going to be for the people who have a ranch out on the plains. Or it's going to be for people who love Texas nature, Texas wildlife and, and that's what it's aimed for. And fortunately, they agreed.

**Russell Graves** [00:14:39] And so from there, it went to publishing, it went to the Press, and I won't lie to you. I can remember it like it was yesterday, because when they asked me where to ship my books to, when Texas Tech University Press asked where to ship my books to, I wasn't patient enough for them to ship to my house. I just said, "Ship them to the school." And then the UPS guy brought them by to my classroom one day, and in front of my, in front of my class, I got this shipment of 20 books in and opened it up, and it was literally the best Christmas present ever I had.

**Russell Graves** [00:15:09] Because it's one thing to work on it. It's another thing to look at a book that's as beautiful as that thing was, and in my opinion, still is, because I'm looking at a copy on my desk right here. It was just pretty cool to see it and see it all done and in print, and in such a sleek package, and with my name on it, that was, that really, in my mind, sort of brought a lot of things for me, full circle. And I did it at 30 years of age.

**Russell Graves** [00:15:37] And, you know, I've had other projects since then than I've done, but I go back to this one. I tell people all the time, "Prairie dogs are the best dog I ever had." They did so much for me professionally, you know, financially, I'm not going to say that I did it for free. You know, I did, I did make money off of it because it was a pretty good seller. It was kind of a slow burn, but it was a pretty good seller for the Press. And, and it's, you know, it's been a, been a big part of my life, and a big part of my identity and in who, who I am for, you know, the ensuing 20 years since the book came out.

**David Todd** [00:16:17] You know, I'd be curious to know what people's reaction has been to this book, I mean, starting with the students in your class when that shipment of books arrived. And then I guess you you've also, you know, over the years, given presentations, as you said to the Lions and the Rotary Clubs and to, I'm sure many, many others. How do people react?

**Russell Graves** [00:16:46] You know, I can. They act in two ways. I can only know what I know, but you know, living in a small town in that rural community? A lot of, I could have wrote in that book that, prairie dogs are the only thing that will save mankind long-term, I

wrote something as ludicrous as that. And then all these people that know me would have still been proud of me. I mean, so the fact that I did a book, and a small-town boy makes good there. There is that behind it.

**Russell Graves** [00:17:15] But you know, the other part, it's, it's hard to know for sure, because most of the people end up buying your book, you just don't know them and you never communicate with them. But I was, there's still, a few copies available to you that you can buy through Amazon, and I was looking on Amazon the other day. Just, and I don't mean this as a vanity play. I was just trying to order one of my books to send to somebody. I didn't want to send an old copy that I have. And, and when I was looking online, you look and it doesn't have a lot of reviews, but they're all five-star reviews. So I look at that and think, well, someone, someone liked it. You know, at least eight people liked it.

**Russell Graves** [00:17:48] And you know, and as Texas culture goes, and I hope especially rural culture goes, I hope we sort of keep this in mind. But I was always raised to say, if you don't have something good to say, don't say anything at all. And if there's been much negative backlash about it, I haven't heard about it because everyone's always been so nice about it to me. And, you know, I've actually written six books, had six books published, and it's not anything I lead with when I'm in conversations, but it's, I'll be honest, it's always kind of cool when it comes up, when people find out that I've done books and especially books like prairie dogs, because so much of what I do, I still spend in the outdoors, you know, whether it's, it came up, well, the reason I was buying the book for someone because we were out in the field and I started telling about prairie dogs. And how in the world do you know so much about prairie dogs. I said, "Well, it just so happens. I wrote, at least at the time, THE book about prairie dogs." And you know, it kind of makes a, it kind of leads into, you know, deeper conversations from there.

**Russell Graves** [00:18:53] So again, you know, it's, it's not John Grisham or Stephen King level where I could I could retire off the number sold, you know? I'm assuming Texas Tech Press was happy with its performance, and, you know, I got checks for a lot of years from those books, it's out of print now, but I got checks for a lot of years from the sales off that book, and it's, I'm happy about that. And you know, the return rate ultimately, I think, was pretty low for the Press.

**Russell Graves** [00:19:21] And so, yeah, you mean you take it for what it is. Again, it's not anything that's meant to be a, anything that's meant to be a scientific deep dive into the prairie dog. It's a 20,000-word magazine article that kind of talks about the good, the bad and the ugly and kind of where we got to where we were in the early 2000s when the book was published. And kind of what brought us to that point in time, and a lot of cool pictures, to kind of accompany that because,...

**David Todd** [00:19:51] Well, you know, I'm glad you put it out there.

**Russell Graves** [00:19:59] I'm sorry. Are you still there? Hello.

**David Todd** [00:20:08] Pointed at you. So just as a hypothetical.

**Russell Graves** [00:20:15] I lost you for a minute.

**David Todd** [00:20:17] I'm sorry. I think we're still, still on.

**Russell Graves** [00:20:20] OK? The last thing I heard you say, "I'm glad you pointed out", and then it went blank.

**David Todd** [00:20:26] Well, I'll maybe go back and fill in. I'm glad that you took the risk to, to write and, and publish this, and I know that's always a risky thing.