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**INTERVIEWEE:** Lynda Watson

**INTERVIEWER:** David Todd

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**Google Voice** [00:00:01] This call is now being recorded.

**David Todd** [00:00:05] Hello, Lynda.

**Lynda Watson** [00:00:07] Well, hello, how are you?

**David Todd** [00:00:09] I'm fine, fine. Good to talk again. Thank you for, you know, obliging with my schedule, for calling back to do it a little later.

**Lynda Watson** [00:00:21] Hopefully, somewhere down the pike, this whole project might save a few prairie dogs' lives, you never know.

**David Todd** [00:00:31] Well, that would be a nice outcome. And yes, it's a nice chance to document and recognize the interesting work that you've done for a number of years. So I wanted to thank you for participating. It's kind of you.

**Lynda Watson** [00:00:48] No, well. It's what I do.

**David Todd** [00:00:53] Well, we appreciate it.

**David Todd** [00:00:55] Well, so, I would like, if you don't mind, to give a little introduction to what we're doing today and then just launch into those questions that we discussed before. Is that OK with you?

**Lynda Watson** [00:01:10] Yeah, that's fine.

**David Todd** [00:01:12] Okay.

**David Todd** [00:01:13] Well, good afternoon, David Todd here, and I am very fortunate to be with Lynda Watson. And with her permission, Ms. Watson's permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a nonprofit group, the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is at the University of Texas at Austin. And she would have all rights to use the recording as she sees fit as well.

**David Todd** [00:01:54] I just wanted to make sure that that is what she expected, and that's agreeable.

**Lynda Watson** [00:02:02] Well, that sounds fine with me.

**David Todd** [00:02:05] Okay, well, let's get started. I'll try to lay out when and where it is, and give you a very brief introduction, and then we'll launch into some of the actual questions and your thoughts.

**Lynda Watson** [00:02:20] All right.

**David Todd** [00:02:20] It is February, February 4th, 2022, about 2:30 Central Time. My name is David Todd and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas. And I am in Austin, and we are lucky to be conducting a remote interview with Ms. Watson, who is based in the Lubbock, Texas, area. Ms. Watson and her firm, P.M.S. Recycle Vermin are well known for having rescued, I think the latest tally is over 200,000 prairie dogs over the past 35 years. They managed to pull them out of sites where they are not welcome to find new homes in the wild or as pets. And her work has been covered widely by everything from the Wall Street Journal to Texas Monthly to the Houston Chronicle to even Mike Rowe's TV show, "Somebody's Gotta Do It." So, we are just the latest person to come knocking on her door to find out about her life and career.

**David Todd** [00:03:32] And so today we'll talk about her, her life and work, and especially focus on her efforts on behalf of the black-tailed prairie dog. Um, and with that, I just wanted to thank you again for doing this.

**Lynda Watson** [00:03:50] And you're quite welcome.

**David Todd** [00:03:53] Well, good. Thank you. And we typically do these interviews sort of in chronological order. So we wanted to start with your early years and, and ask you to tell us about your childhood and early years and to know if there were some people or events or something that might have influenced your later interest in animals and prairie dogs in particular. What do you think?

**Lynda Watson** [00:04:23] Well, I was born in 1954 in Michigan, and I'm a Hatfield. And strange as this may sound, basically, both of my parents were Hatfields. There's somewhere back there, a grandmother that's also an aunt and I'm not sure.

**Lynda Watson** [00:04:41] Anyway, there were four of us. We were basically raised by drunks. It was a very odd hillbilly childhood. So, you know, I spent most of my early years fishing and assisting my dad in poaching deer and fishing and hunting and just hardscrabble making-do.

**Lynda Watson** [00:05:07] I had a grandmother who was just absolutely wonderful. She cared for us quite a lot, and she, she was always there helping me make traps to catch a squirrel or anything I wanted to do. She, she'd help. You know, she'd take me fishing, or we'd go wander around the woods. And so I don't know. It's not an early interest in wildlife. I mean, it's pretty much BEEN my life to this day. I'm not very comfortable in houses, have no desire to have a grand home. I want to be outside.

**Lynda Watson** [00:05:48] And prairie dogs came along much later in life. Up until, oh, the early '90s, I mean, I had seen prairie dogs, but I never really paid that much attention to them.

I was a horse trader, a horse trainer, a cowboy, if you can believe that, you know, here in Texas. And I actually was quite a famous drunk in my own right.

**Lynda Watson** [00:06:17] And actually, I think prairie dogs probably saved my life from that. There did come a time when I realized if you're going to devote yourself passionately to something, it might be best if you were sober. And I can't tell you when that came about, it just, I decided maybe, maybe it was time to straighten up and find some direction here.

**Lynda Watson** [00:06:47] The first prairie dog I ever laid my hands on, a gentleman here in Lubbock was needing some adult male prairie dogs for gallbladder research. And if you're a ninth-grade education drunk, you'll do anything for a dollar. And when he said he'd certainly buy some prairie dogs, I decided the best thing to do would be to go out there and catch some.

**Lynda Watson** [00:07:18] And the first one I laid my hands on was a fairly amusing scene, I'm sure, because I was rolling around on the ground with it in a stranglehold, and it was trying to kill me. But I did catch it. And that was the start of a long, long career doing this.

**Lynda Watson** [00:07:41] If I had been a man, the chances are this love would never have happened. But during the course of capturing some of these prairie dogs for this sell, I managed to catch one that had been bitten by a rattlesnake. These are babies. And another one that had a broken hip, and I brought them home and nursed them back to life. And for 12 and 13 years, they ran around loose in my house, eating the sofa and sleeping on the pillow with me. And well, the rest is history.

**David Todd** [00:08:23] So they were companions for a while.

**Lynda Watson** [00:08:27] Yeah. Like I said, you know, chances are, if I had been not a female, this would not have come about. But you know, when you get a girl and she catches a baby animal and she decides to fix it, well, you know, you get interested. Observing those two, that would have been Chewie and Balley, the three-legged (she did lose a leg from the rattlesnake bite). Why, I don't know if I would have kept this up, but observing these animals in the house, just, they're fascinating creatures.

**David Todd** [00:09:10] Yeah, tell me, what did you learn about the how they behave and what their life histories were like?

**Lynda Watson** [00:09:17] Well, I mean, the interesting thing about a prairie dog is it's a very social animal, and it's very hard not to anthropomorphize a pet prairie dog. A prairie dog's society is so much a mirror image of our own. They care for each other's young. They're one of the few mammals that any, any baby prairie dog will be adopted if the mother gets killed, by another female prairie dog. They'll, they'll nurse females that are not even their mother.

**Lynda Watson** [00:09:58] And, and so they're extremely fierce and territorial about their home. They're extremely loyal to family members. I mean, a pet prairie dog in your house can be at times very similar to having a very tiny Rottweiler guard dog. They generally do not care much for strangers. They will guard you. They will attack a stranger that comes into your home. I mean, they're amazing little creatures.

**Lynda Watson** [00:10:33] And like I said, they're just so similar in their emotions and their behaviors that they're quite comfortable to live with. Now, they're not a house pet for everybody because they are a wild animal. They will chew up your sofa. They will chew up an

extension cord. They will. I mean, they're pretty destructive. Like I said, they're not for everybody.

**Lynda Watson** [00:11:00] But, but they're extremely, extremely intelligent. They're squirrels. I mean, they're basically untestably intelligent. So they're, they just move right in with the family and just become a member of the family. They come when you call them, they know their names. They, you can't make them do tricks. You can't discipline them. But they're, they're fascinating and very, very loyal.

**David Todd** [00:11:36] Sounds like the ideal little companion to have with you. So tell me a little bit about what they're like in the wild. I've heard that they can be seen as sort of a keystone species where they support all other kinds of animals in the local area.

**Lynda Watson** [00:11:56] Well, after observing these animals, I was actually thinking about this, and I don't think I've been doing this for 35 years. I think I've been doing this now for over 40 years. But I don't think you can have a healthy prairie without prairie dogs. They keep the invasive species mowed down. They provide habitat for many, many other animals. They produce short grass prairie. They're the gardeners of the West. I mean, they, they, without prairie dogs, it's very difficult to maintain a short grass prairie. They, they're very short. They're little, little short guys, and they're fat. They can't run very fast. Because of that, they really need a good field of vision.

**Lynda Watson** [00:12:55] So, part of their duties, it's not that they eat all of the taller vegetation, they'll cut it down. They'll keep it mowed so that they can be sure that there's nothing that, that an enemy, a coyote, a badger, whatever, can hide behind. And they, they create prairie.

**David Todd** [00:13:22] That's really interesting. So, otherwise, these prairies might do go through some sort of succession and end up being a landscape filled with mesquite, or huisache, or some, some kind of hardwoods. Is that where it might go?

**Lynda Watson** [00:13:39] That's that's, that's exactly what has happened. That's exactly what has happened. You know, the area that I live in now, they call the Llano Estacado, the Staked Plains. This area is not. It's, it's either cotton fields or mesquite forest. If you want to have grasslands any more, you have to spend amazing amounts of money, removing mesquite, continually removing mesquite, doing prescribed burns, using chemicals, aerial spraying, all sorts of things to do the job that the prairie dogs used to do.

**Lynda Watson** [00:14:27] You know, historically, this area up here, we had the southern bison herds, and these herds would come through here in the millions, about twice a year. The prairie dogs would pretty much keep the brush and tall vegetation down. And then these bison herds would come through and it was kind of like locusts coming through. I mean, they'd graze their way across the plains, eating this grass down short and then they'd move on. And this process just went on back and forth and back and forth.

**Lynda Watson** [00:15:08] What happens now is we have fences and intensive year-round grazing with cattle, and it's, it's a mess up here. It's very, you know, a native prairie that is truly open is a very rare sight.

**David Todd** [00:15:39] So I've also heard that what the prairie dog does is, is often underground and it's, you know, these, these burrows that they dig and that they, I guess, I've heard that they provide a lot of habitat out of, out of the weather, out of the sun. Is that true?

**Lynda Watson** [00:16:01] Well, in this area, we don't have rocky bluffs or anything that might be considered shelter, if you will, for many, many of our species, most specifically rattlesnakes, you know, or any of the snakes, snakes, the box turtles we have here, many species of lizards. It's not so much shelter from the cold. It's shelter from the heat. You know, most animals, you know, have got to have some shade. There is no shade here. We don't have rocky bluffs, trees, in a normal prairie situation.

**Lynda Watson** [00:16:49] And so these burrows provide shelter in the daytime and then these creatures who are in generally abandoned prairie dog burrows, although there are some species that get along quite well with the prairie dogs. But you know these are creatures that come out at night. The prairie dogs are diurnal, prairie dogs are only out in the daytime, so you've got a 50-50 ecological landscape here that is totally dependent upon those prairie dog burrows.

**Lynda Watson** [00:17:25] You know, many of our, our species, they're in terrible decline right now - the prairie chicken is a species of great concern. These animals need prairie dog towns to thrive. You know, there are just so many species, and we don't really think about this. There's an amazing amount of insects. When you stick your arm in a prairie dog hole, first of all, on the top of every single burrow, it's going to be a spider. Generally, a black widow, it'll be on top of your hand when you pull your hand back out. Snakes - just so many.

**Lynda Watson** [00:18:05] And then in the wintertime, any of these reptiles that need to hibernate, that's where they are. They're down in those burrows. Their very survival depends on them having places to get down deep enough to spend the winter. And we're doing a darn good job of doing away with the prairie dogs. I don't think that most people even consider how many other species we'll lose if we lose the prairie dogs.

**David Todd** [00:18:42] Yeah, it seems like something that I certainly wasn't aware of, and thanks for teaching me about it.

**David Todd** [00:18:51] You know, I've read just, in trying to prepare to talk to you, about how prairie dogs were also a favorite prey for a variety of species, you know, from ferruginous hawks to black-footed ferrets that used to be seen in state. Is that another, you know, significant role for prairie dogs?

**Lynda Watson** [00:19:19] Oh, indeed. I mean, any, any predator ... for instance, our raptor migration, you know, many raptors come south in the fall. And they used to traditionally be able to just follow, and they would, these migration routes tracked the, the, the prairie dog towns, which were just about continuous, continuous, continuous from Canada all the way to Mexico. And now these birds are having to follow a spot here and then a spot there and then a spot there.

**Lynda Watson** [00:20:04] A prairie dog is a very fat, slow rodent. You know, they weigh, you know, on an average two and a half pounds. And there's a lot of fat in them. It's, they're a good source of food for, for a lot of different animals.

**Lynda Watson** [00:20:23] You know, a lot of our snakes are not so much dependent upon eating the prairie dogs, as they are dependent upon the mice that shelter in the prairie dog burrows. But, you know, golden eagles - huge, huge food source. I did a project for some ranchers down in the Van Horn area, and they're working very closely with trying to reintroduce and care for the desert bighorn. And they were having a tremendous problem because the golden eagles were getting the lambs. We reintroduced prairie dog towns and discovered in two years' time, and this is with game cameras and everything else, those eagles would much prefer to hunt the prairie dogs as the lambs.

**Lynda Watson** [00:21:15] I mean, the whole system is so out of balance because prairie dogs are not where they need to be. You know, coyotes eat them. They're not spectacularly successful, but yes, they catch some. Badgers are just very dependent upon them. There are just so many species that they are a food source, and when we reintroduced them onto private lands, you know, that's one of the first things I have to tell the landowners. Look, you are going to see some predators start to come in. And they're going to eat some of these prairie dogs.

**Lynda Watson** [00:21:55] And that's a wonderfully good thing. That's, that's what we're trying to do here. Don't get excited about this. You know, we need to restore balance and balance is also key to having, you need a good predator load, you need a good prey load. And one is not more important than the other.

**David Todd** [00:22:28] Yeah, I can see how they'd go together, as part of the, I guess, of the natural cycle.

**David Todd** [00:22:36] You know, something that I think you mentioned when we were just getting to know one another and I'd never thought about this, but it makes so much sense. You know, I've been reading in the paper about the wildfires up in the Panhandle, and you pointed out that some of these areas that have been mowed by prairie dogs can be, you know, a real oasis, a real refuge during these fires. Is that, maybe you can explain a little bit more about what you mean by that.

**Lynda Watson** [00:23:05] I'm having some pretty good success now with attracting some landowners in some of these areas where they have more tall grass because wildfires are becoming more and more prevalent. And we have cattle, we have wildlife, but we don't have prairie dogs. And so if you've got grass that's up over your knee on a fairly flat area, and the wind's blowing 35 miles an hour, you're not going to get your cattle out in front of that fire. Those deer can only run so far before they just collapse. And of course, if they encounter a fence at the property line, well, they just stack up on the fence and burn up.

**Lynda Watson** [00:23:59] But if you do have some fairly extensive prairie dog towns, either you can, ahead of the fire, drive your cattle to the prairie dog towns. You know, we have we have a very good system. Our Forest Service sends trucks out there. I mean, they're trying to do what's called heading that fire, get up in front of it, get it stopped. But they can't outrun a fire in a 30 mile an hour wind. And the wind always blows up here. They can't. I mean, some of these firemen lose their lives. They get trapped by these flames.

**Lynda Watson** [00:24:35] But when that fire hits a prairie dog town, it'll immediately start spreading laterally across the wind and either dies out on its own, or it's a fairly simple matter to, you know, get some fire breaks and just go out and stop it right there.

**Lynda Watson** [00:24:53] Back in the good old Western movie days, you know you'd hear John Wayne screaming, "Ma, prairie fire! Get the kids! Go to the river!" There's no rivers up here. You know, traditionally even the Native Americans knew that when the prairie's on fire, run for the prairie dog town. Grass smoke is not that toxic, but the flames from knee-high grass in a 30 mile an hour wind now, that'll kill you very quickly.

**Lynda Watson** [00:25:30] And so I'm getting some landowners that were, you know, spending some time thinking about prevailing winds. You know, if a fire breaks out over there by the highway and the fire is going to go that way, you know, why don't we put fifteen acres of prairie dogs right down here in this corner. And then if fire does break out, we can very quickly move our cattle up into that corner and hopefully all will be well.

**David Todd** [00:26:06] Wow. I guess a lot of these services that the prairie dogs provided are just getting rarer and rare. I, I wasn't aware, again, until I started trying to catch up on what you've been doing.

**David Todd** [00:26:20] You said that there's been a big decline in prairie dogs. And I'm just hoping that you could sort of give us the 101 introduction to, you know what the trend has been over the last 100 years or so?

**Lynda Watson** [00:26:37] Well, you know, I mean, there are biologists who probably are much better educated than I who would have much better ideas of these figures. Now what I have observed in 40 years is there are three things right now that are deadly, deadly danger to prairie dogs being here in the next 100 years. And surprisingly, it's, it's not government programs.

**Lynda Watson** [00:27:12] The number one enemy is the plow. OK? If you have 700 acres of grassland and you've got prairie dogs and you've got cows and all seems to be going OK. But then over 30, 40 years, they break that land out around you, until your 700 acres is completely surrounded by plowed cotton fields. OK?

**Lynda Watson** [00:27:47] Now, that means you don't have many predators, because not very many predators are going to live on 700 acres. So that means all the prairie dog pups are going to survive. Normally, Mother Nature intends that maybe one pup out of a litter will make it. They don't reproduce that rapidly. They only have one litter per year. And they don't breed until they're two years old. But you know, if your acreage is completely surrounded by plowed land and nothing is feeding them, if you give it 20 or 30 years and you've got a full load of cattle on that too, then you're going to have a landowner screaming and cursing because his 700 acres is now bare dirt, and he's going to blame it all on the prairie dogs. OK?

**Lynda Watson** [00:28:40] But the fact of the matter is you don't have predators. You have cattle continually on the property, as opposed to just coming through twice a year, as the bison did. I mean, God did not make many mistakes, but prairie dogs now live in a world that is not particularly conducive to the ecosystem they were designed for. So it. So that's number one, you got the plow and fences.

**Lynda Watson** [00:29:15] OK, then we introduce plague, I mean, we didn't do it on purpose, but nonetheless it is a devastating disease and very definitely an issue. Prairie dog populations can recover from plague, but it's, it's a major, major, die-off when you get plague in an area.

**Lynda Watson** [00:29:35] The third thing that will surprise a lot of people, and it scares the hell out of me, is every time the U.S. Fish and Wildlife starts screaming that they're going to put prairie dogs on the endangered species list, millions of them get killed. Because this rancher who really never has paid much attention to the fact that he's got 60 acres of prairie dogs. OK? It's fine, no problem. "Oh, yeah, but Fred, what about the Endangered Species Act? My God, you won't be able to graze cattle. You won't be able to control the population. Why, it'll ruin your ranch!".

**Lynda Watson** [00:30:17] So they quickly go out, buy poison, hire somebody, do anything they can to kill every last prairie dog on their ranch before they get declared "endangered". And it's a, it's a problem. I have seen more prairie dogs killed the year before they decide whether or not to list them as threatened or endangered species. Most of the time, you know many, many ranchers, they don't care that there's some prairie dogs out there. But if you tell a man that he's not going to be allowed to make decisions on what's going on on his ranch, well, the thing to do is kill them all quickly before anybody knows. And that's heartbreaking.

**David Todd** [00:31:12] So they fear losing control of the place because there's some kind of limit from the Endangered Species Act how they can manage their land?

**Lynda Watson** [00:31:21] Yeah.

**David Todd** [00:31:22] That's, that's so interesting, you know, kind of the opposite effect that you'd hope this thing would have, but.

**Lynda Watson** [00:31:30] Sure. But you know, I mean, the whole idea here is, gosh, if we could just get the very last prairie dog on the planet dead before they were declared endangered, man, that's what we need to do.

**David Todd** [00:31:46] Yeah, yeah.

**Lynda Watson** [00:31:47] Well, you know, it's look, I mean, we successfully did that with the wolves. You know, we almost got it done shooting eagles.

**Lynda Watson** [00:31:57] And, you know, by that, by the hair of our ... I mean, we had to get wolves from Canada. We'd just killed every one in the United States. The Endangered Species Act is a great idea, but it hasn't been thought through or perhaps the landowners haven't been educated. I'm not sure. I mean, that's not my, that's, that's just me out in the field observing. But it's, it's, especially here in Texas, you don't tell a landowner what he can or can't do with his land or he's going to get radical on you.

**David Todd** [00:32:41] Yeah. Okay, um, well, so this gives us a lot of background as to why what you do is so important, that these creatures are really significant to the ecosystem and they're declining, or rare in some places, at least.

**David Todd** [00:33:00] And so maybe you can tell us a little bit about how you started this interesting work rescuing and moving prairie dogs. How did that start for you?

**Lynda Watson** [00:33:11] Well. Somebody put me in touch with an old rancher. I'm talking a very old man. And this was, these are the words that I have lived by now for 40 years. This man met me up at the cow auction, said I hear you can catch prairie dogs. And I said, "Well, I've caught some." And he said, "Could you catch enough of them that we could start a prairie



dog town on my ranch?" I'm a cowboy. I'm like, "What? You want prairie dogs?" I said, "Well, I, you know, I don't know. I've never thought about it. I mean, I can catch them, but I guess we could figure it out." And he said, "Well, the money is no object. I'm 88 years old. I want to see a prairie dog town. We had prairie dogs all over this ranch when I was a young boy and my grandfather managed to kill every last one of them. And I want them back before I die." And I looked at him and I said, "Well, why in the world would you want to put prairie dogs back on your ranch?" And he said, in one sentence, what has basically moved my entire life. He said, "Well. I don't know what they're good for, but I don't think God made any mistakes. So I don't have to know what they're good for. I know they were here and I want them back."

**Lynda Watson** [00:34:54] And that was a good enough answer that caused me to start work.

**David Todd** [00:35:02] Well, so tell me about some of these first moves that you, you've made - these captures and relocations?

**Lynda Watson** [00:35:09] Well, I mean, some of them were spectacular, spectacular failures. I have probably killed, or caused the deaths of, especially in the early years, 30 percent of the prairie dogs I was ever trying to rescue. OK? But, I mean, when you're sitting there watching bulldozers revved up or a guy with a four-wheeler and a bunch of poison, I don't guess those prairie dogs had anything to lose. But I mean, we learned pretty quickly that you can't just take a bunch of prairie dogs out to a meadow and turn them loose, because they don't have any burrows. And so they scatter like quail and run till they can't run any farther. And then one by one, they get eaten by something. I'm sure they disappear. You know, we learned very quickly that you have to build a prairie dog town, and then put prairie dogs in the prairie dog town.

**Lynda Watson** [00:36:12] This involves mowing the grass very short. Picking the right spot. Drilling lots of holes with a tractor and a post hole digger. Coming up with a way to line the holes. I use mesh wire with a cage on top of that, and then you put the prairie dogs in the cage, six or seven to the cage, and put a shade on top of that, and leave them there for several days so they can come up and visit and talk to one another and look all around. In other words, they need, they get a visual of where they are.

**Lynda Watson** [00:36:49] The other thing I learned, which I think might be part of why a lot of these volunteer groups do not succeed, is we hold all of our prairie dogs that are going to be released for a minimum of two weeks. Now the, the number one reason for this, the ethical reason for this, there is no law that says you have to do this. This is my law. If you have to be 100 percent certain that every one of those animals is healthy, you know, and any contagious disease that might have been in that colony will manifest itself when these prairie dogs are here for two weeks in quarantine. The other thing is that if they've been penned up for two weeks, all they want to do is dig a hole and get away from the cage.

**Lynda Watson** [00:37:48] If you catch a prairie dog on Thursday and turn him loose on Friday, he wants to go home. And if you see them drifting, they invariably are heading in the direction of wherever you caught them, even if that's 50 miles away.

**Lynda Watson** [00:38:05] [You still there?]

**David Todd** [00:38:06] Yeah. So there's ...

**Lynda Watson** [00:38:07] Oh, OK.

**David Todd** [00:38:08] They have a kind of homing instinct. That's, that's fascinating.

**Lynda Watson** [00:38:14] Yeah. But if you, you know, keep them penned up long enough, they're much more interested digging a hole and being in a hole and getting out of the cage, than trying to get back home.

**Lynda Watson** [00:38:30] And there's, I mean, there are just 40 years' worth of little tricks to how you even do this. But, but I mean, the basic premise is you catch the prairie dog, you make sure the prairie dog is healthy, you make sure he's old enough and strong enough to, you know, maintain in the wild. You, and it's a crapshoot, you, you try very hard to pick a spot that they will find attractive in as much as I would like to say, I know what I'm doing, sometimes you fail. Sometimes the whole colony says, we' don't want to live here.

**Lynda Watson** [00:39:09] If you're lucky, they move 50 acres away and settle in a place they like better. But nonetheless, you know you're messing with Mother Nature. It's your best guess.

**David Todd** [00:39:23] What is it, how do you make the best guess about what would be a good place to relocate to, after you've collected them and quarantined them and then try to release them?

**Lynda Watson** [00:39:34] Well, I mean, your first, your first consideration is going to be, I think, field of view. I think that's more important than soil, than anything else - field of view. You need a place that has, if possible, just enough slope so that, I mean, when it rains up here, it rains. It won't rain for six months and then you'll get three inches in an hour and a half. You know, you can't have that water running down into those burrows. So you know, you're trying to find a place with a little bit of a slope, appropriate vegetation, and that can be pretty marginal. Prairie dogs can survive in areas that really don't look like a lush, grassy golf course. You know, you've got to have them far enough away that bobcats, coyotes, whatever, can't outrun them to the burrow. Gotta have a pretty big area.

**Lynda Watson** [00:40:46] And that's where I have a lot of problems, but we've had some successes where we've got a landowner that really and truthfully is going to do right by them. And I look the situation over, and I'm not sure that that area is optimal. But salvation of prairie dogs is going to be habitat, and it's not necessarily ideal habitat, it's habitat where people don't want to kill them.

**Lynda Watson** [00:41:14] So I've made some choices that have done fine. And I've made some choices that are fatal. But if you have a landowner that's really dedicated to this and really wants to try, you take it. Because those prairie dogs you've got in your building in quarantine, were going to be killed four days after you left anyway. You know, we're not trying to save the Muffy and Buffy and Brownie here. We're trying to save a colony, a prairie dog town, a habitat, if you will. We're trying to transfer prairie dogs out of a habitat that's fixing to disappear and get them something where they can start to create a natural habitat somewhere else.

**Lynda Watson** [00:42:08] You know, many times I have to make hard choices that, you know, I'm just not real crazy about. But surprisingly, you know, we've had some of these colonies where the first two releases of 30 and 40 prairie dogs failed miserably, but they lasted for a while. We went for the third one, and now, years later, the colony is thriving.

**Lynda Watson** [00:42:36] What can I attribute this to? I don't know - God? I don't know. But if at the end of all your efforts, if you end up with a colony, that's a win. Anybody that says they know all the answers is not an expert. It's that simple. These animals are wild.

**Lynda Watson** [00:43:06] Go ahead.

**David Todd** [00:43:07] It sounds to me like you have a lot of these things to learn from experience, but was there anybody that taught you at the outset some of the basic approaches, basic kind of rules of thumb, on how to, to catch and quarantine and relocate or ...

**Lynda Watson** [00:43:32] Nope.

**David Todd** [00:43:33] Or trial and error?

**Lynda Watson** [00:43:35] Yeah, I've pulled every bit of this out of my butt. It's, it's, you know, it's like I tell a lot of these kids I've mentored over the years. You know, it's like, "Look, I'm going to show you how to put this gate in. And don't think that I'm a genius, and that's why I figured out how to put this gate in, right? No, no, no. It's just I've spent 20 years putting gates in wrong. And then I finally stumbled upon something that worked. And so there's no point in you wasting a whole lot of material doing it wrong. Trust me, if it can be done wrong, I've already done it wrong. Do it this way."

**Lynda Watson** [00:44:22] And that's, you know, I've had some monumental arguments with entities like Texas Parks and Wildlife, you know, because they'll call and they'll say, "Well, we want to put it in a prairie dog town at such and such place, and we want the prairie dogs in March, because our biologist says that that would be the best time to put the prairie dogs out." And I say, "Well, I'm sorry, but I can't help you." "Well, why not?" "Because in March, these prairie dogs have tiny little pinky babies down in the burrow. And even if I were willing to capture mommy and daddy and leave those babies down there to die, those mothers are going to be so upset because I've yanked them off their pups. They're not going to stay. They're going to go looking for their babies. It won't work."

**Lynda Watson** [00:45:19] You know, a lot of it's just common sense. But you got to look at a lot of prairie dogs to figure out what, what is common sense with regards to prairie dogs.

**David Todd** [00:45:33] Well, let me ask a related question, about what other people who might have helped you along the way. I think you mentioned that some of these prairie dogs get injured, you know, they get diseases. Have there been any vets or doctors that have helped you heal and bring this prairie dogs back?

**Lynda Watson** [00:45:58] Yeah. Dr. Jim Gleason in Levelland, Texas and I have worked together for, well, almost from the get-go. I mean, we've come up with different protocols for different problems, and which antibiotics work with them and which don't. How do you amputate a leg? Can that prairie dog survive with an amputated leg? How do you, I mean, you can't put a cone of shame on a prairie dog, so how do you keep him from chewing the stitches? How do you, you know, and what is, you know, what injuries can you repair and which ones are hopeless?

**Lynda Watson** [00:46:39] And some of those judgment calls are harsh. You know, we, we catch some prairie dogs that are injured in such a way that if this was my pet prairie dog, we

could do some surgical intervention and that animal could live a very happy life. But this particular animal could not survive in the wild with these particular handicaps. I mean, nature's very harsh. Nature is very brutal.

**Lynda Watson** [00:47:14] And you know, at that point then, you know, you could say, "Well, gee, I could, you know, keep this prairie dog here at my facility for the rest of his life. Yeah, I could keep this thing in a cage for 11 years and it wouldn't die." But what am I offering that animal, really? It's not tame. It's not accustomed to people. Baby prairie dogs very quickly are very happy. But there are very few instances, I mean, the one that comes to mind is Ripley. I captured a prairie dog one time. This prairie dog had five legs, six feet, two rectums, a penis and a vagina. The fifth leg came right out right under its tail, right where its rectum should have been. And on the end of this leg is two feet and on one side of his butt cheeks, he's got a female set of sexual organs. On the other side, he's male.

**Lynda Watson** [00:48:25] Ripley! You know, oh my goodness, this is amazing. And we run up to Jimmy's and we take all kinds of X-rays, and we look the whole situation over. And it wasn't a baby. It was a young dog, maybe a year old. And decided that removing the extra leg there would be a fairly simple surgical matter, really. You know, we're not going to do gender reassignment and rerouting all the plumbing. You know, the plumbing is working just fine. Ripley lived here for nine years because if I had turned her loose and she were to, highly unlikely, but if she were to become pregnant, there's no way, as deformed and strange as his pelvis was, that babies could have passed through it. So she did live out her life in a cage, but we just got her a very big cage and a buddy.

**Lynda Watson** [00:49:30] But generally speaking, if you have an animal that cannot live, and it may be living quite fine in its old home, but will this thing be able to dig a burrow in a new situation? You know, you have to make decisions that are tough and just let them go. You can't, and that's, that's part of why I don't work with volunteers because they just are generally very emotional and frankly, they get in the way anyway.

**Lynda Watson** [00:50:10] Well, you know, I think a lot of what you are doing these days is working with these wild releases, but, but I understood that, you know, in the past, at some points, you've also supported the, the demand for pets.

**Lynda Watson** [00:50:27] And I still do.

**David Todd** [00:50:30] Oh, you still do. Can you tell us a little bit about, you know, this market for prairie dogs as pets?

**Lynda Watson** [00:50:38] Sure. I mean, the first thing most people who are anti wild animals as pets need to understand about baby prairie dogs is, from my standpoint anyway, a baby prairie dog is a byproduct. They're going to develop this land. They're going to kill every prairie dog on it. And these pups are eight to 10 weeks old. They're running around all over. I catch them. I catch their mommy. I catch their daddy. I can't turn mommy and daddy loose in a new colony with six babies. They cannot care for those babies and dig a burrow. You've got to wean those babies.

**Lynda Watson** [00:51:27] Okay, now you've got weaned babies. If I had the financial ability to keep these babies for, well, generally my cut-off about June and July, they're big enough you can go ahead and move them. But okay, if you were to hold them that long, they're not prairie dogs anymore. They're meeting you at the cages and grinning and holding out their paws and

wanting you to pet them. And I mean, they're very social animals. They don't speak prairie dog anymore.

**Lynda Watson** [00:52:01] What do you do with them? Drown them in a bucket?

**Lynda Watson** [00:52:06] So I mean, they bring in some pretty good money. They're in very great demand. And like I said, you've got to do something with them. And frankly, they, they fund all of my equipment. I mean, right now I'm heating a building, and it was 12 below zero here with the wind chill this morning, for four prairie dogs. You know, it's, this is not a cheap proposition to do this.

**Lynda Watson** [00:52:39] So and these prairie dogs are sold domestically in quite a few states in the United States, and they're extremely popular overseas, because they're an animal that unlike a guinea pig or a bunny rabbit or something. I mean, I'm sure people who raise guinea pigs would be very affronted to hear this. But they're not that interactive. A guinea pig'll sit in your lap, and it'll be happy to see you, and you can hand it a carrot. It's not going to curl up next to your neck and pat your face when you've got a fever. And it's not gonna come running up the hall dragging your sock because you left them laying on the floor and hand them to you. It's not going to jump in your lap and take a nap while you're watching TV. Prairie dogs do that. They're very happy in captivity.

**Lynda Watson** [00:53:34] Overseas, where so many people really want a pet that will show affection and be very interactive, but they don't have a yard. I mean, dogs got to potty somewhere. And OK, dogs bark and cats smell bad. A prairie dog is born house-trained. It's not going to run around your house pooping on the floor like a rabbit will. It'll go right back to its cage to its little potty spot. They're very affectionate. They don't have any real odor. They live a long time. They live eight to 12 years in captivity.

**Lynda Watson** [00:54:14] And like I said, you got you got to do something with them, and they're very fine pets for people who understand what they're getting into. You know, when I write articles about the care of pet prairie dogs or, you know, do any interviews on that particular subject, pet prairie dogs are not my passion. But you got to do something with them. But you spend the first half of your discussion about, do you want a pet prairie dog, trying to talk these people out of it. You need to know what you're, you know, what you're getting into, but they're a very rewarding pet, and the big thing is they're very happy in captivity. And they live twice as long in captivity as they do in the wild. That should say something about that.

**David Todd** [00:55:03] That's so interesting.

**Lynda Watson** [00:55:03] I've a prairie dog out there in the building right now, and his name is Meezie Gambezi, and he's literally insane. And that's why I've still got him. He's 14 years old. And he's doing fine. But he's crazy. He'll attack anything that moves, including me. I can't place him in a zoo. He doesn't speak prairie dog. I can't release him into the wild. The other prairie dogs would kill me. OK, I'm stuck with him. But I should have probably put him to sleep, but heck, I got room for him. He can just stay here. So he is.

**David Todd** [00:55:46] You've mentioned a couple times that some of these animals speak prairie dogs, or they don't speak prairie dog, and I've heard that that's one of the really extraordinary things about these animals, that they are, they have a, you know, a big

vocabulary. They're really communicative. And I was wondering if you could give us a little insight on that.

**Lynda Watson** [00:56:06] Prairie dogs, I am convinced, actually in their language can use adverbs and adjectives. I mean, when I drive on to some of the towns that I'm regularly patrolling or working with, they know the difference between my truck or another truck. So if I'm going to take a film crew out somewhere, I don't take my regular truck. We borrow a truck, take a different truck. If, I mean, they learn very quickly. The prairie dogs in the parks in Lubbock, actually, and I've watched this know breeds of dogs. You'll see some lady out there with an incredibly obese cocker spaniel or beagle or something, or a little dachshund on a leash, waddling along. These little prairie dogs don't even duck in the burrow. They just sit there. The dog can walk past 20 feet away.

**Lynda Watson** [00:57:00] You walk past them with her, you know, a Malinois, or, you know, something that could possibly outrun them and kill them. Man, they're down, 100 yards away. And they're calling the whole time. I mean, everybody in the colony instantly knows, "Hey, there's somebody here with a fast dog and it's not on a leash." I mean, there's no doubt that's what they're saying. They're phenomenally intelligent.

**David Todd** [00:57:33] And it sounds like they work as a group, they, it's important to them to act as the sentinel or a guard for the others in their coterie?

**Lynda Watson** [00:57:43] Oh yeah. You know, in a very extensive colony you can watch, and I've observed this, of course, in 40 years, that's all I do is sit around and watch prairie dogs out there. You'll have a very large prairie dog collar. I'm talking, you know, 100 acres of prairie dogs. And you'll look over on the side and you'll hear somebody start screaming, and halfway up the colony, there's three guys standing up over there on the west side, everybody's down and then you see a coyote starting to come across. And those three guys hold the ground, "Yip, yip, yap, yap, yap, yap." "There's a coyote, there's a coyote." And I'm sure they're saying he's over at Ted's house, because in a little while that coyote will get close to the middle of the colony where the three guys are standing up. At that point, they duck into a hole and farther along on the other side of the colony, three other guys pop up and continually, yak, yak, yak. When the coyote gets all the way across that way, then three guys from where he started out pop up and they're calling. I mean, they're telling everybody, exactly. There's always somebody above ground telling everybody else where the danger is.

**David Todd** [00:59:09] That's amazing. I guess that's what it takes to survive if you're the smallest and the slowest and the one that's on the ground and there are just all kinds of predators prowling.

**Lynda Watson** [00:59:22] Yeah, I mean, that is their function on Earth is to feed a predator. I mean, that's their lot in life. They are going to be eaten, but they have developed a system that makes them very good at avoiding them. They weren't, they weren't graced with being particularly fierce. They're not very fast. But they're really smart.

**David Todd** [00:59:55] Well, they seem to have lots of really interesting aspects and, and I can see why you've worked hard to get them in places where they're better protected.

**Lynda Watson** [01:00:09] Yes.

**David Todd** [01:00:10] Could you talk about just to give people an example of some of the relocations that you've done? I mean, I understand that you've moved prairie dogs many, many times to different locations, but maybe you can give us a few examples of how you've organized them and carry through on them.

**Lynda Watson** [01:00:31] Well, what's very interesting is I've got, because I don't even own a computer. I am not a presence on the Internet. But there is a lady, Dr. Geena Seaberg in Washington state, and she is my presence on the Internet, if you will. And so she gets calls constantly, both from people that want prairie dogs removed and private landowners and even public entities that want their prairie dogs back. So she sorts through the wackos and who's realistic. You know, I'm in the field. I don't have time to talk to all these people all the time. And she'll, she'll kind of get stuff organized, and if she thinks it's something that's doable, she'll give me their phone number and I'll contact them, and we'll set it up.

**Lynda Watson** [01:01:39] I mean, we've established prairie dog towns from up in Oklahoma, I love Oklahoma. I love working in Oklahoma. Their wildlife department is such, that if generally they are going to contact me, and they say, "Can you come up here and there's a prairie dog colony here and they want to eradicate them, and we don't want them to eradicate them and we actually want the prairie dogs. So could you come up here and catch them and then you turn them over to us, and then we will then find a home, you know, get them moved."

**Lynda Watson** [01:02:17] That's great for me. We've got colonies all over. We've got colonies up in the Panhandle. We've got colonies as far south as Mason, which is just about as far south, really, that's at the very edge of their range, but there is habitat there and there is welcoming landowners. So we're going to try it. But it's, it's, I mean, it's just a constant juggling act to figure out what to do with them.

**Lynda Watson** [01:02:47] You know, we furnish a lot of prairie dogs to zoos all over the world. San Diego Zoo has prairie dogs and I don't know, shit, we send them constantly here, there and everywhere. But those are these youngsters, the babies, you know. We'll, we'll go ahead. And you know, if a major zoo wants 14 prairie dogs for an exhibit, we'll crop out some of these babies and start handling them, and we'll take them to PetSmart. And we'll, you know, take them to places where they get accustomed to the noise and the hubbub. And, and then when they're big enough, well, we'll put them on an airplane, ship them off.

**David Todd** [01:03:33] That's amazing. Well, and for those that don't go into a zoo, maybe you can sort of lay out what happens to them. I think that, from what I've heard, you sent prairie dogs to both Caprock Canyon State Park and to Mason Mountain Wildlife Management Area and ...

**Lynda Watson** [01:03:57] Yes.

**Lynda Watson** [01:03:58] We're, we're, we're also, you know, we're working. Yeah, we're working on another, I'm very excited about this, and I'm, Parks and Wildlife is being a little cautious because the mayor. So I'm not going to name it, but we also have some wildlife management areas now up here in the Panhandle that are, are making noises about wanting to go ahead and do it. And that's, I mean, if you can't get your Parks and Wildlife department behind you, then what are you doing? You know, come on, guys, you're the wildlife people. Help me out here.

**Lynda Watson** [01:04:37] And it's, it's slowly turning around. I've done some projects for the Nature Conservancy. I did a very large job for the Army Corps of Engineers up in Oklahoma a few years back. You know, it's and how these people find me? I don't know. I just let them find me. But I think, you know, if you Google "Lynda Watson" or "prairie dogs" or anything on the Internet, if you're good at pushing buttons, you'll, you'll eventually find me.

**Lynda Watson** [01:05:08] And then I have to tell them, "Look, I do not have a website. I do not do the Internet. I do not text. I'll talk to you on the phone, call me. And we'll see what we can do."

**David Todd** [01:05:23] So I think you explained a little bit about the three major steps, I'm probably missing 10 steps, but of collecting them, quarantining and moving them, and then I guess the fourth step, of course, is preparing a site. Can you kind of walk us through each of those steps, what it takes to collect and quarantine them, and move them and then release them?

**Lynda Watson** [01:05:53] Well, to catch the prairie dogs we pull a 500-gallon water trailer behind a regular pickup. And this, this water trailer has a drain that sticks out of the back of it, with a valve on it, an inch-and-a-half piece of rubber hose, about maybe 18 inches long. So all this water's gravity-fed. You don't dare pump water, because they keep up against that kind of flow.

**Lynda Watson** [01:06:24] So what you're doing, what you're trying to do, is you're trying to convince them that a large thunderstorm has just started and that the water is lapping over the top of that mound, and you got to get out. You're tricking them. You can't fill that hole up with water. There's not enough water in the world to fill many of these burrows. And so, you sit on the edge of the area and you target specific, you don't just willy-nilly pick a hole and go to dump in water in it.

**Lynda Watson** [01:07:01] You look, you see where that animal is. You watch him for a minute or two. If you're real lucky, he'll leave the big deep nest burrow. You'll catch him wandering over to the potty hole. Now if he wanders over to the potty hole, he really does not want to be in there during a thunderstorm. I put some dish soap in that water. And what that does, is that when that water falls out of that pipe, and splashes down in that burrow and makes suds, it makes volume. And as that prairie dog's coming up, he gets soap in his eyes. So he's never really going to see me.

**Lynda Watson** [01:07:41] Anyway, you get down on your hands and knees. There's several methods. You can use a little noose on a stick, you can stick your hand in the hole and hold it up near the top of the burrow and just feel him as he's passing under your hand. Or you can even use, as we call them, traps. It's kind of a little tube cage with a little one-way door that you can push into that hole.

**Lynda Watson** [01:08:07] In a given job, I'll use all three of those methods. Some of them just bolt right out like they're shot out of a cannon, in which case just stick that little trap on it. You know, some of them will come up, but they won't, they won't come up far enough that you can get your hands on them. Then you shove that noose pole in there, and you can feel them when they stick their head through it. You know, pull the wire, pull them on out. Or you just grab them by the back of the neck and pull them out.



**Lynda Watson** [01:08:33] And as soon as you do now, you've got an animal that's wet. He's got fleas on him and he's got soap in his eyes. So, the first thing you do is carry him around to the front of the trailer, and we've got pump-up sprayers full of clean water and you wash his face real good. We're not too worried about the rest of his body because it's just soapy water. By the next morning, he'll be just as fluffy as he can be.

**Lynda Watson** [01:09:00] So you get his face cleaned off real good, then you give him a good spray with some serious, serious flea preparation, you know, like prescription stuff, because we will not bring a flea home. And then after that, you examine him real good and make sure he doesn't have any injuries or anything that you might need to, you know, put him in a separate cage to check him over later. And then onto the next guy.

**Lynda Watson** [01:09:29] And then when you bring them home, you get them out of the cages, get them into the, into the building. And for the first night, you just put them in there with a whole bunch of hay and let them, let them hide. And they'll explore that cage all night long. You put them anywhere, eight, eight to 12 to a cage. You don't, you don't want to just put two or three to a cage. With prairie dogs, safety in numbers. If you have a pretty good bunch of them in each cage, they'll just huddle up together rather than slamming around, running into the sides of the cages. Getting bloody noses. I mean they're wild animals. They're terrified. So you really have to, you know, take their psychological concerns into account.

**Lynda Watson** [01:10:16] You keep it quiet, and usually by two or three days, they're very, very comfortable in the cages. And they figure out that Mr. Hand is absolutely not go in that cage and they'll come right up to the side of the cage and watch you. A lot of them will eat out of your hand if you poke a piece of carrot or something in there to them.

**Lynda Watson** [01:10:44] And then, after two weeks, of course, anybody that needs to go see the vet goes to see the vet. In the meantime, you've got two weeks to figure out where they're going. Then you call your landowner and you tell them to get the site prepped. I've already made a trip there, and he's mowed an area of about four acres down just as short as he can mow it, and drilled me a whole bunch of holes.

**Lynda Watson** [01:11:12] And then I show up, set the cages over the top, and put the prairie dogs in the cages. Stuff that cage up on top full of hay because that's their, that's their insulation that keeps that hole down below from getting hot. Also, if it were to rain, it would shed that rain so the water doesn't run down in that hole. Put a top on it, so they've got shade. Just leave them alone for a few days. And pray.

**David Todd** [01:11:49] How big are these holes that get drilled? How deep the hell, and what's the diameter of them?

**Lynda Watson** [01:11:56] Oh, ideally, I like to use a six-inch auger. A four-incher is too small, because all six of them that you got in that cage are going to go down in that hole, which means that they would be stuffed in that hole, which means the guy in the bottom isn't going to be getting much air, you know? So I like a six-inch hole about 30, 32 inches deep. This is not their forever home. This is just shelter until they calm down.

**Lynda Watson** [01:12:30] And then you let them out of these cages. And as soon as they come out, they immediately greet everybody else in the colony because they, you know, they recognize one another. You'll see them greeting one another. I'm not even that concerned if I've got, you know, if I catch a male out of this hole and then later on in the day, I catch his

mate. And she ends up in another cage during quarantine. I get in a lot of arguments with biologists who say, "Oh my gosh, you've got to keep the families together."

**Lynda Watson** [01:13:03] My theory on that, "Is OK. The aliens kidnapped my husband and I and two kids, took us off somewhere for a couple of weeks and then dropped us all on a deserted island. The first thing I'd do is go, "Hey, Darryl, yea, you're here." You know, they'll get back together. That's not an issue at all.

**Lynda Watson** [01:13:29] So as they come out of these cages, they'll spend the day just running around, greeting each other. Then they start digging. They never stay in those initial holes that you dig for them anyway. That's just temporary shelter until they can start their own burrows.

**David Todd** [01:13:52] OK. You know, one thing that you said earlier is that some of these relocations don't work. And I was wondering why, if you've sort of gone back and looked at ones that have failed and tried to figure out what might have gone wrong in their new home?

**Lynda Watson** [01:14:18] Well, I mean, you know, some of it is just that the habitat was not appropriate. And I'm as guilty as the next. I mean, sometimes these things fail. But you know, I'll get into a situation like I said, where we've got some biologist who tells Texas Parks and Wildlife, for instance, "OK, you need to put these prairie dogs out in March." Well, no, you don't. No. No, they got babies in March. You know, you want to do a release after all the babies are weaned, so they're already used to the idea that the babies aren't there anymore. You do not want to relocate them in late December, January and February, because they're pregnant, they can't be digging burrows and establishing a colony when they're pregnant. You have to know about the species.

**Lynda Watson** [01:15:24] So many people in there, you know, I don't want to throw rocks at anybody, but you'll get these different little volunteer groups around the country and they're so excited. And oh my goodness, and they're going to save the prairie dogs in the Wal-Mart parking lot and they all get together and, and, you know, they watch a couple of videos, probably one of mine. And so they go out and lo and behold, they catch eight prairie dogs. They have no place to hold them. No appropriate caging. Don't even know how to feed them. Have no clue what to do. Half of what they do is they'll take them to an existing prairie dog town and turn them loose, which is not legal, number one. And number two, the resident prairie dogs beat the hell out of them, drive them down the road and they all perish.

**Lynda Watson** [01:16:10] That's prairie dog removal, that's not prairie dog relocation. You know, it's, if you talk to anybody that has done any wildlife relocation, it's a crapshoot. It's very technical, it's very difficult and there are no hard, hard and fast rules. You know, we're messing around with Mother Nature and you just do the very best you can. And if you make a mistake, well, don't do that again. Most people don't have lifetime to learn how to do it right, you have to learn how to do something wrong before you stumble and learn how to do it right. That simple.

**David Todd** [01:17:01] Well, it sounds like there's a kind of added complication to doing these releases in that, that it's, it's unpopular from what you're telling me. Even Parks and Wildlife, which I guess is sort of considered the authority on the state's wildlife, and they are very skittish from what I've heard. What is it that they've told you when you've spoken to them abouts different release, you know, where they're kind of wary of trying this?

**Lynda Watson** [01:17:32] Well, generally speaking, they're more concerned about ticking off the neighbors than they are with reestablishing historically important species, unless it happens to be something that people buy licenses to shoot, in which case they're all over it. You know, it's, it's, just it's a problem. You know, prairie dogs are ranked by the state of Texas as what's called a non-game species. There's no, there's no hunting season. Nobody pays vast amounts of money to buy a prairie dog lease and sit in a blind and shoot prairie dogs. And you know, it's, it's, it's, it's just a very delicate thing because what one landowner wants ... prairie dogs have this this reputation of being the devil incarnate, you know? Oh, my goodness, little Joe, the wrangler's, you know, horse fell and killed him, and, and they're going to scalp your land down to bare dirt, and they're just a horrible plague. And they're, you know, and we've spent hundreds of thousands of dollars eradicating them, and now you're bringing them back and it's a very sensitive issue.

**Lynda Watson** [01:18:56] It's not unlike the efforts to bring the wolves back to Yellowstone. You know, I mean, it's, it's a very emotional subject.

**David Todd** [01:19:09] And do you have an idea of how these beliefs about prairie dogs got started and how to survive. I gather that some of them are just not really accurate.

**Lynda Watson** [01:19:24] I'm not sure I understand the question. Try again.

**David Todd** [01:19:27] Well, yeah, so I've heard some people say that, that there was the fear that, you know, their, their cows or their horses would break a leg in a prairie dog hole. But then I've heard other people say, you know, bison, by the millions, managed to avoid these prairie dog holes. And then other people, you know, have, have objections about them eating the, or mowing the grass too short. But then folks say, "Well, you know, the grass that remains is really high in nutrition. It's actually good for the cows." So I'm curious how these old beliefs survive generation after generation, even when people poke holes in them.

**David Todd** [01:20:19] Does that make sense?

**Lynda Watson** [01:20:20] I do. Yeah, it's ... you know, for every time that I manage to talk to a progressive third-generation rancher who wants prairie dogs, there's always Uncle Ferd standing there, screaming, "Well, they dig holes all the way to the aquifer and they'll pollute the water system, and they're going to create atomic bombs. And an Armageddon is going to come. And they're going to, and they're going to." And you can't, you can't go, I just quit going mano a mano with those guys. You're not going to win. Yeah. I mean, there are still people who think rattlesnakes can jump through the air and bite you in the throat. You know, there are.

**Lynda Watson** [01:21:04] We live in a generation where everybody is petrified of the wilderness and wildlife. I mean, we've devoted an entire culture to eradicating anything natural. You know? I mean, the first thing we do if we're going to build a park is kill all the animals and mow all the trees down and bring in, I don't know, you know, invasive species and strange things. And let's, let's introduce salt cedar and, and Russian olives. And you know, it's crazy. It's absolutely crazy. Why would something that happens to live in Africa be better here? But it's just the way we are. We're scared to death of nature.

**Lynda Watson** [01:21:55] And I've given up arguing with these people. If you talk to a landowner that's interested, then you can tell them, "Cows have four legs. If a cow sticks one leg in a prairie dog hole, he does not fall down. And a prairie dog hole is much bigger than a

cow's ankle. That foot is not stuck in the prairie dog hole. He just trips a little bit." Now, if you've got 28 cowboys chasing those cows, cows at a dead run at night through the middle of a prairie dog town, I suppose an accident could happen. My advice is don't do that. You know.

**Lynda Watson** [01:22:44] It just, it does not happen. The Native Americans, you know, have laughed and laughed and laughed about this cows and prairie dogs. So, you know, for years before we had horses, believe me, we tried to chase buffalo through prairie dog towns because if we could just get one of them to break its leg, we could jump on it and eat it. And they never did. Nothing happened. That's why we don't do it. We had to run them off cliffs because prairie dog towns just didn't work.

**David Todd** [01:23:18] Well, you know, from your years doing this, maybe he gives you advice about where things stand. You've been doing this for, what did you say, 40 years. What, where do you think the prairie dog will be 40 years from now?

**Lynda Watson** [01:23:40] You know, I really don't know. You know, I, I spent a lot of time soul searching. I can hunt prairie dogs for the rest of my life. I'm 68 years old: that's not going to be a whole hell of a lot longer. I am not going to save the species. I'm not even going to make a raindrop in a bucket.

**Lynda Watson** [01:24:13] But, for every time people come up when I'm catching them out at the schoolyard and I tell them what I'm doing. And for every landowner who invariably shows up with his relatives, bunch of kids, whatever. For every prairie dog, I send to a zoo, you know, if that prairie dog can just convince 10 other people that we don't have to kill every prairie dog alive, that's what, that's all I can hope to do. That's all I can do. I mean, all I'm doing, I hope, is educating a whole bunch of people that we don't have to kill everything that crawls out there just because we don't like it.

**Lynda Watson** [01:24:58] It's like that nice old man said, "God didn't really make any mistake. And we don't even have to know what they're good for to know that there's got to be a place for them." This is the, this is the finest country in the world. Surely there's a little bit of room here and there for these guys. I mean, we don't have to have every inch of this.

**David Todd** [01:25:31] Well, and you're trying to find that that little inch of it. I admire that.

**David Todd** [01:25:39] Well, is there anything that you'd like to add about what you've learned from your work and life with prairie dogs?

**Lynda Watson** [01:25:48] Well, I'll tell you. You know, when I was a young woman, and, and I've always been very interested in wildlife, and I always thought if I was going to be an eco-hero, that, man, I would be the champion of, I don't know, eagles or wolves or wild horses or, you know, something grand and noble. And, and apparently my place is with these little underdogs. And I don't think I have wasted. If the last prairie dog dies in hundred years, I bought them 50 years, I don't know. I mean, I don't know if I'm doing anything at all. I really don't.

**Lynda Watson** [01:26:31] I'm making a very modest living. I live in a single-wide mobile home in a very bad neighborhood, and I'm very happy with it. And I've got a mission. And that seems like every year I get a little more, I don't know, sympathy, if you will, a little more, more people willing to listen.

**Lynda Watson** [01:26:54] And that's I mean, that's the, that's the one thing that people have going for them. It's communication. You know, we have communication, we have dialog, oh, wait a minute, prairie dogs have that too, but they have no power.

**Lynda Watson** [01:27:12] You know, if, if enough people just will stop and think and quit listening to Uncle Ferd, maybe, maybe there will be some places for them. You know, I mean, the last statistics I heard was in 50 years, we were going to lose like, I don't know, something like a quarter of the species on Earth. That's pretty sad. The only thing I can say is prairie dogs are really smart and they're really adaptable. They may have a shot at dodging that one. But it's a numbers game. You know, it's a numbers game.

**Lynda Watson** [01:27:57] The sad part about it is they don't breed in captivity, so we can't even count on that.

**David Todd** [01:28:06] They don't. I see.

**Lynda Watson** [01:28:09] Very, very rarely. Very rarely. You know, so it's not like you could, you know, set up a prairie dog breeding facility like we do hedgehogs or something and just raise this us up a bunch of them. It just doesn't work.

**David Todd** [01:28:33] Yes. You know - one thing and a last question for you. You said that we're fortunate that people communicate, and I guess that's a way of maybe teaching and learning. When you have done these releases, or actually when you do the captures, do, do you, can you sort of describe what people's reactions are to what you're doing? You know, whether they, they're repulsed by it, or whether they're pleased by it? Or what do people tell you when they see you at work?

**Lynda Watson** [01:29:07] Well, you know, it works out real well. If I'm at a schoolyard and you get a 50-50, you'll get some old guy coming out, stomping up to you. What are you doing? Oh, right, right, right. Well, and I hate them, and I can't believe that they're not killing them. And then I say, "Well, yeah, but I'm making them go away." Then he's like, "Well, they get in my yard." I said, "Yeah, but I'm catching them, I'm making them go away." Well, then he's saying, "OK, great, you're getting rid of them. OK? Excellent. You're removing them." No problems from him.

**Lynda Watson** [01:29:42] I get cars driving by where people are screaming and cursing at me, "Leave the prairie dogs alone, or leave the prairie!" You know, and if you can wave them over, I'm more than happy to give them a few minutes and educate them. And you say, "Look, this is a schoolyard. And we have two choices here. We, because a prairie dog hole is indeed a very great danger to a creature that only has two legs - that would be us. You know, you can't have a prairie dog hole on the Little League field. You will break a leg. But you know, they come up and they, they: "We feed them and we love them." And you say, "Well, here's the choice: the school board says, 'either I can get them out alive and find them a new home or they're going to have to gas them.'" So we've opted to not kill them, and you should be thankful, and you might even call the school board, and tell them how much you appreciate that they decided not to kill them. Well, then you've made another friend.

**Lynda Watson** [01:30:53] So it's always a win / win when you're removing a prairie dog. Now, when you're releasing the prairie dogs on private lands, you've got the rancher and his family and sometimes neighbors who are quite unsavory and are interested in him, you know, and also participating. In other words, there's nobody there that hates prairie dogs because,

well, that guy doesn't know what we're doing. You know, or sneaking around doing this. So that's always very positive also.

**Lynda Watson** [01:31:28] It's, oh, it's the occasional I've got 100 prairie dogs in the back of a truck heading for a release site, and we've got to stop to get gas in San Angelo, where you get a truck full of cowboys that want to get a little confrontational about it. Frankly, I just lie and tell them I'm delivering them to the game wardens. I have no idea where they're going, because it's simpler.

**David Todd** [01:32:03] Oh, you're a clever one. Well, and you're very patient. Thank you so much for your time today. I learned so much. Is there anything that you would like to add, something that I maybe had missed or gotten wrong?

**Lynda Watson** [01:32:21] Oh yeah. I mean, let's look real quickly here. Covered habitat. And oh, the vacuums! Well, we don't need to talk about the vacuums. I mean, here it asks, "What do you think about the vaccine collection technique?" Now, there, I don't think there is currently a vacuum commercially running in this country. I sincerely hope. That's a, it's a very cruel method of collection. And it's, you know, we, we generally use nothing but water. I occasionally do set out traps. But the traps are, they've got to be monitored very carefully because if prairie dogs once they're up in that trap, are exposed to the sun. So you have to, have to really watch.

**Lynda Watson** [01:33:15] The vacuum sucks those prairie dogs, snakes, spiders, anything in that hole plus dust, dirt, fecal matter, hay. And then they're slamming around in the vacuum cleaner bag. Of course, it isn't really a vacuum cleaner bag. But, you know, think about putting your tiny little baby animals in your vacuum cleaner bag, and running around outside for a while and you'll understand why I'm so violently opposed to vacuums. I think they should be outlawed for humane reasons. But it's, it's no more effective than what I do.

**Lynda Watson** [01:33:56] Anyway, that kind of digressed off to the side. Like I said, I think, I think the main thing, and the whole message that my life stands for, truly and really, is can't we all just get along here? You know, let's, there's room for prairie dogs in this world. And we've got to find those places. But there are places. And in those places, those animals aren't going to be causing anybody any trouble at all.

**Lynda Watson** [01:34:27] And as far as, you know, prairie dogs feed predators. You know, those predators, they eat your calves and your sheep and your whatever because they don't have anything else to eat anymore? Well, gosh, if you had prairie dogs, they wouldn't be eating sheep. Would they? No. You know, there's a place for everything on this earth and prairie dogs just happen to be one of those important guys that really need a place. And that's, that's a message that I'll spend the rest of my life trying to put my money where my mouth is.

**David Todd** [01:35:07] Well, I wish you all the best. I hope you find many places, and big places, for these little guys. And thank you for telling us about your life making that happen.

**Lynda Watson** [01:35:19] Well, well, you know, it's, it's coming. I mean, this ranch that I'm going to down South of here, we put one prairie dog town, and the family enjoyed it so much (very large) that we put a second town in last year. It's doing well. I'm going down there this week because they've decided they want a third town. They're not worried the prairie dogs are going to take over the ranch. They've seen that they, you know, they're very happy and

that's, those are the people I'm looking for, very open-minded. They look, they see, they form their own opinions, and they say, you know, this is a good thing. This is a great thing.

**David Todd** [01:36:05] Another satisfied customer. That's great.

**Lynda Watson** [01:36:09] Yeah. Yeah. All right, you know, if I can just find me another two dozen of those that'll keep me busy for the rest of my career.

**David Todd** [01:36:20] Well, I hope you do stay busy. And thank you for squeezing us into you schedule. I really appreciate it. Thank you, Lynda.

**Lynda Watson** [01:36:30] All right.

**David Todd** [01:36:32] Good day, and good luck to you for your next prairie dog adventure.

**Lynda Watson** [01:36:37] Yeah, every day is an adventure, I'll tell you. All right. Well, good luck with this.

**David Todd** [01:36:43] All right. Thank you so much. You have a good day.

**Lynda Watson** [01:36:46] Bye bye.

**David Todd** [01:36:48] Bye, Lynda.