

# OUTDOORS +

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2018 B1



This is how you usually find a marmot, on top of a rock watching the world go by. (Photo courtesy of Colorado Parks and Wildlife)

## The whistle pig

Every member of the animal kingdom has some special trait or characteristic that they are specially known for. For example, a turkey is known for its keen eyesight while a whitetail deer has unbelievable hearing. The whistle pig is known for his ability to sleep.

The whistle pig is officially known as the yellow-bellied marmot. The marmot is the largest member of the ground squirrel family, even though there is little resemblance to a squirrel. There are 15 species of the marmot found worldwide, but the yellow-bellied is the only one found in Colorado.

In some parts of the country, they are called ground hogs or woodchucks. Think about Punxsutawney Phil looking for his shadow on Ground Hog day each year in February. Our yellow-bellied chap would not be awake in February.

In the Colorado marmot's defense, they sleep so long probably because of where they live. These guys are found at altitudes from 6,500 to 13,500 feet, calling the alpine tundra "home."

Marmots are an example of true hibernators. They go to bed some time in September and do not climb out of their dens until late April or May. The first thing they want to do when they wake up is eat. The marmot may have lost up to half its body weight over the winter months. Imagine burning calories while you sleep all the time. Perhaps there is a new fad diet idea there.

The marmot can weigh upwards of a dozen pounds and reach an

overall length of two feet. They have a thick reddish-brown fur and a yellow belly, from which they got their name. They look like a big and chubby fur-ball, but their body size is an adaption to the very cold, high elevation in which they live.

Officially classified as omnivores, marmot eats grass, flowers and the occasional insect or bird eggs, when they can find one. When a marmot is feeding out in open areas, another will usually stand guard and let out a sharp whistle when danger is detected. This allows any marmot around a chance to make for the nearest burrow entrance. When above ground, marmots spend much of their time feeding, in order to fatten up for the long winters.

Yellow-bellied marmots live in colonies consisting of 10 or more individuals. They dig very elaborate mazes of burrows. Some of the burrows will exceed 15 feet in depth. That is no small feat, considering the hardness of the ground at their chosen altitudes.

The Marmot's world is truly a man's world. The male, who also shares in the responsibility of raising the young, maintains a harem of breeding females. Each female will give birth to a litter of 3 to 8 pups annually, after a 4-week gestation period. The young will stay with their mother the first summer and usually hibernate with her. Like all things wild, only about half the litter makes it to maturity.



### Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

High country marmots are known for their ability to beg. Most hikers can tell you about these fur-balls and their love for cookies, bread or crackers tossed to them. They will stand on their haunches in the traditional begging pose for these treats.

Any high country traveler will also tell you about the sounds a marmot makes. Everything from high-pitched chirps and yelps, to a singing and whistling, hence the name "whistle pig." The series of sounds they make, seem to go on nonstop, once they get going. They make a "chuck" sound also, which might explain the name "woodchuck."

As a side note, the woodchuck found in the eastern and southern States remains silent. Maybe it is because they have no one to talk to. The woodchuck is the most solitary of all the marmot species, just the opposite of our western socialite.

Humans do not exploit marmots in Colorado. In the southern United States, Mongolia and Russia, they are hunted for table fare and fur value. In the Alps, marmot fat is made into a medicine that is claimed to help with rheumatism. Personally, I will stick with an aspirin and leave the whistle pigs alone.

One of the strangest historical notes I could find about the marmot occurred in Pakistan around 2,500 years

ago. A Greek historian by the name of Herodotus wrote of large, furry, "golden ants" that enriched the Persian Empire by burrowing for gold.

It seems these creatures turned out to be golden marmots that dug their burrows into the gold-bearing sandy soil, several feet underground. The word "ant" probably arose through some confusion over the Persian word for marmot.

This was thought of as a silly legend until 1996, when a group of European explorers spoke with local tribes members, who explained that their ancestors used this method of gold retrieval. Bits of gold were recovered from sand that stuck to the marmots fur, as they inadvertently brought the gold-bearing sand up and deposited it on the surface. My Jack Russell Terriers dig holes all over my yard, and I have yet to see a speck of gold from it.

In the next life, I think I would like to come back as a Colorado marmot, live in the high country, and sleep for 8 months a year. As it is now, I can't even get a 30-minute nap on the couch; my wife sees to that. Until then, I will just enjoy the serenade of the "whistle pig" when I visit his alpine home.

*Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email [info@mcspi.org](mailto:info@mcspi.org)*

Find your **HIDDEN** *Treasure!*

The Montrose Daily Press Local Market Place Find everything you know you want - and even things you didn't

**MONTROSE PRESS**

[montrosepress.com/classifieds](http://montrosepress.com/classifieds)

A collection of vintage items including a red bicycle, a small television, a record player, a fan, a car, and a telephone.