

*Marmota flaviventris*

# Yellow-bellied marmot

By Julie Lue

**SCIENTIFIC NAME** *Marmota* is Latin for “marmot,” possibly derived from the French *marmotte* or the Latin *mus montanus*, or “mountain mouse.” *Flaviventris* is a combination of the Latin words for “yellow” and “belly.”

A few years ago, while driving through one of Missoula’s busiest intersections, I saw something move near the road. Next to a gas station, a low, furry animal scampered across a triangle of lawn. It was a yellow-bellied marmot.

I couldn’t believe it. Years ago, when I lived in Colorado, I thought of marmots as creatures of the high country, where I’d find them sunning themselves on boulders or romping across windswept meadows of wildflowers. But this one was hanging out in a city—miles from the mountains—surrounded by big-box stores, car washes, and fast-food restaurants.

I’ve since come to appreciate the versatility of these cat-sized rodents. While yellow-bellied marmots do live in subalpine and alpine zones, they also survive at lower elevations and even urban environments.

## IDENTIFICATION

A close relative of the groundhog, the yellow-bellied marmot is a member of the squirrel family, weighing 5 to 11 pounds. It has short legs, a long and fluffy tail, and mostly yellow-brown fur with a yellow or rust-red belly and a whitish muzzle. Montana’s other marmot, the hoary marmot, is bigger and grayer, and has black feet

and white-tipped guard hairs that give it a grizzled appearance.

Both species are sometimes called whistle pigs for the sharp, high-pitched call used to warn other colony members of danger.

## RANGE AND HABITAT

Yellow-bellied marmots inhabit parts of southwestern Canada and much of the western United States, including the western two-thirds of Montana. Sometimes called rock chucks, yellow-bellied marmots are usually found near rock outcroppings, boulder fields, or piles of rock and rubble cleared for construction next to meadows.

Human development does not seem to deter them, though when they get into barns and outbuildings they are often trapped and either killed or relocated. In Missoula, they live in the rocky riprap lining the Clark Fork River, including that infamous marmot often seen near the corner of Mullan and Reserve streets. “People call me about that one all the time, wanting to know if it’s okay,” says FWP nongame wildlife biologist Torrey Ritter. “I tell them it seems to have that busy intersection all figured out.”

Where the range of the yellow-bellied and hoary marmots overlap, in far western Montana, the hoary is found at slightly higher elevations.

## FOOD

Yellow-bellied marmots eat grass, flowering plants, and an occasional bird’s egg. As fall approaches and temperatures drop, they concentrate more on calorie-dense seeds.

## BEHAVIOR

Yellow-bellied marmots live in extensive burrow systems dug in the soil beneath rocks and boulders. Burrows provide a place for marmots to sleep, hide from predators, nurture offspring, and hibernate.

During the day, marmots frequently emerge from their burrows to eat, sunbathe, play, and fight or chase marmots from other burrows. Eating is serious business, as they need a thick fat layer to survive hibernation. Starting as early as August at some elevations, yellow-bellied marmots curl up with other colony members in a chamber lined with dried grass and fall into a deep sleep for six to eight months.

## REPRODUCTION

Breeding season starts when the animals emerge from hibernation in spring. A female gives birth to three to eight pups and weans them about seven weeks later. Yellow-bellied marmots are relatively long-lived for rodents and can survive 13 to 15 years in the wild and more than 20 years in captivity. 🐹

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