

# The Wild Side

by Dave Gibson

## YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOT

Marmots, also known as “whistle pigs” or “rock chucks”, can be found in alpine regions around the globe. Marco Polo called them “pharaoh’s rats.” In Pakistan, the marmot’s prodigious digging skills were used to find gold. Fat from marmots in the Alps was at one time rendered to treat rheumatoid arthritis. Countryside Mongolians consider them a delicacy in their traditional meat dish “marmot boodog” when salted, filled with hot stones, and sealed for an hour and a half. Historic miners eking out a living in our area weren’t above occasionally preparing a “marmot stew” with carrots, onions, and potatoes. Classified as a small game animal in Colorado, I’m told that they taste somewhat like wild duck.

Usually more interested in photographing them than eating them, I find viewing opportunities in the Rocky Mountains for the yellow-bellied marmot to be endless. Preferring elevations between 6,000 and 13,000 feet, talus fields and montane meadows suit them as do the edges of coniferous forests and roads. You’re as likely to see one off a nature trail as you are crossing the street. On the Mount Evans road they sometimes bask occupying potholes while narrowly escaping injury or death from car tires each day. Some of the “pot-holes”, a few of which have been created by them, are entrances to their dens that can reach 23 ft. in depth. Marmot dens contain living rooms, bedrooms, eating rooms, and toilet rooms.

Heavy-bodied with yellowish-brown fur, demarked by white spots between their eyes, they can weigh up to eleven pounds and be 28 inches long. “Harem polygynous” colonies may hold twenty members with about four mature females sharing in care of the young. Males except for the patriarch are driven off with the beginning

of the second summer. Omnivorous, the marmots’ diet consists of grasses, leaves, roots, flower blossoms, roots, lichen, mosses, legumes, and berries. With an occasional grasshopper or bird egg thrown in, by autumn they feed mostly on seeds.

When danger approaches, marmots belt out a whistle from whence their nickname came. Scampering or waddling depending on the time of year, they return to the entrance of the den continuing the trill alarm call a number of times and duck inside. After the threat has subsided, they’ll return to their business of sunning and eating. Other communications between marmots include a variety of “chucks” and “chirps.”

By September yellow-bellied marmots are ready to hibernate. During this time they will lose half of their body weight. Usually in a deep torpor where their heart rate and body temperature lowers, once a week they experience a group “arousal.” In America the marmot’s closest relative is the groundhog whom each February 2nd by popping out of his hole foretells the coming of spring. It will be May before the marmot will see his shadow.

*Dave Gibson is a photographer & writer focusing on the natural world around us. His imagery can be found on his web site at [www.davegibsonimages.com](http://www.davegibsonimages.com)*

