



WILDLIFE NOTES

Yellow-bellied marmot

Marmota flaviventris

Much of the alpine and subalpine area of northern New Mexico is covered by a thick blanket of snow in the winter. Peaks and ridges form a harsh environment for animals that live there. One creature, unfamiliar to many humans, is the yellow-bellied marmot, also sometimes called the rock chuck. Our western marmot is closely related to the eastern woodchuck, or groundhog.

They are also called whistlers or whistle pigs because of their

loud, shrill alarm call.

Marmots live in burrows among the rocks of talus slopes near grassy, high-mountain meadows of northern New Mexico. They may have lived in all of the state's mountain ranges in the late Pleistocene period.

On bright summer days marmots perch on points of rock to sun themselves, and you are more likely to hear an alarm whistle than to see a marmot. They often spot you first and dive into cover. Relatively few are caught napping by predators, and the rock cover usually protects them – except from the digging of the strongest, most determined black bears. Marmots live in rather scattered colonies, and their alarm call will send all neighboring marmots into hiding.

Inside a marmot's cheeks are pouches that are short, shallow cavities, a half-inch deep or less, located much like chipmunk's pouches. The pouches are rudimentary and related to the animal's life-style. Marmots do bring some grass to the burrow, but this is for building nests rather than for food.

To prepare for winter, marmots eat wild plants, grass and clover, accumulating fat. Marmots fast for about two weeks before hibernating. If the digestive track were not emptied in this way, natural processes of elimination or fermentation in the intestine would hinder the deep

sleep of hibernation.

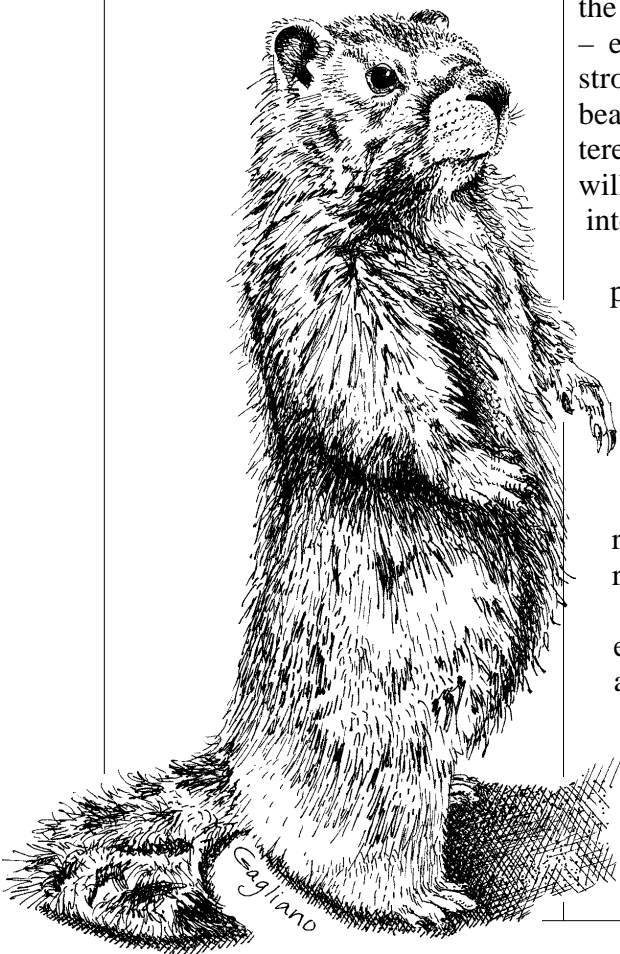
Reaching the necessary level of body fat is a process that depends on the availability of food. Marmots high up in mountains, where food may be scarce, may still be packing it in while marmots on lower, lush meadows have already gone into hibernation. In addition, the young of the year are apt to begin hibernating somewhat later than adults, because they have used much of their summer's food intake for growing, and they need to eat longer to put on fat.

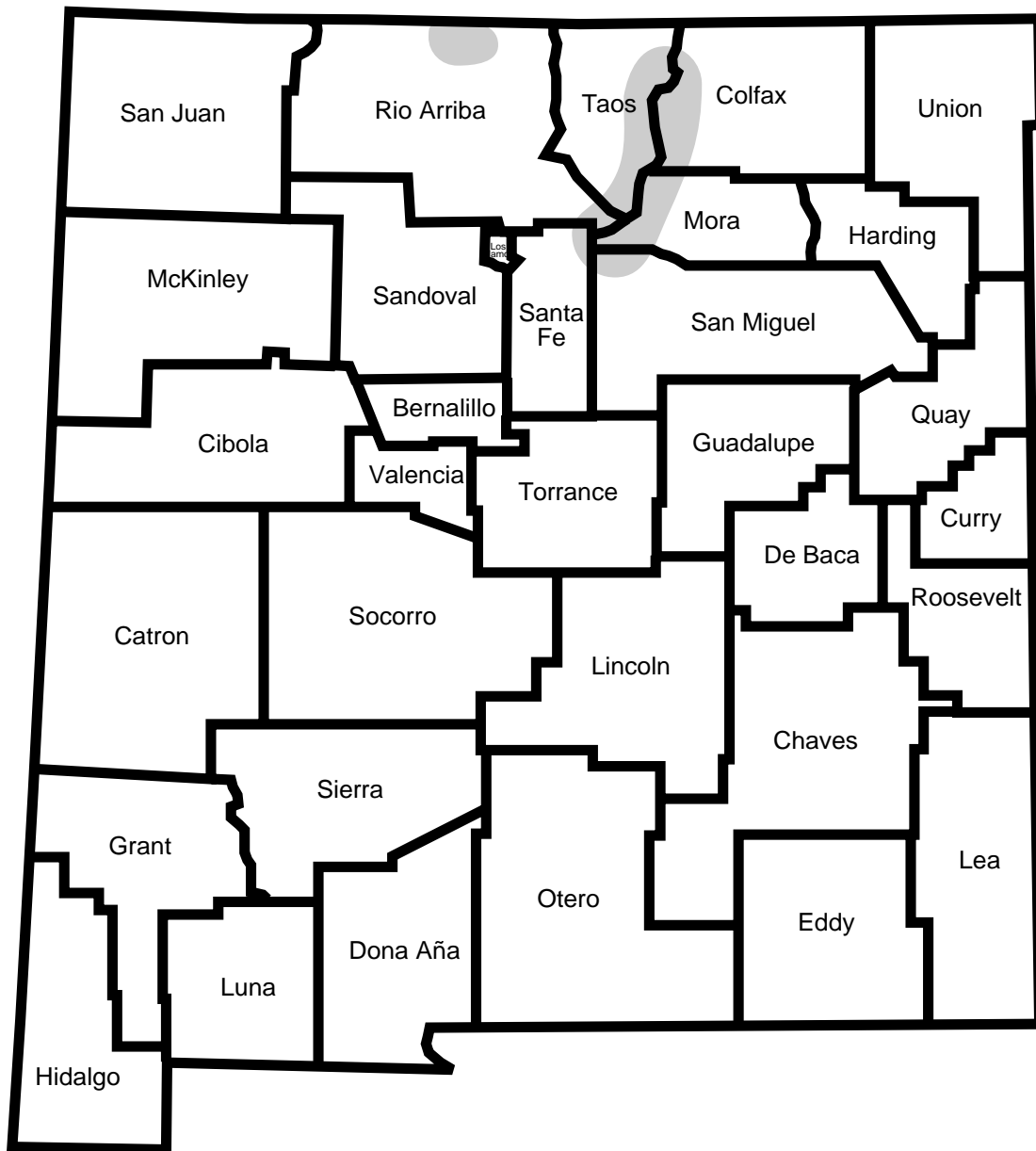
The marmot is a true hibernator. Its heart slows to four to seven beats a minute. It breathes in and out about once a minute. Its body temperature drops to 40 degrees F or lower. It lies curled tightly in a ball with its paws over its eyes. The marmot very effectively survives the half-year long winters of the high mountains when no food is available.

Depending on local conditions, marmots may enter hibernation from late August to early October and emerge in March or April – or later. The young are born in late April and early May, to give them maximum eating time before their first hibernation; There are from three to eight in a litter.

One last bit of information – the yellow-bellied marmot is protected by the state of New Mexico.

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Shading indicates yellow-bellied marmot range.

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