

MARMOTS HITCHHIKING FROM RMBL

🕒 July 31, 2019 👁 127 Views

Going for the ride of their lives in the name of warm engines

By Katherine Nettles

About 12 years ago, recalls wildlife biologist Dan Blumstein, a yearling yellow-bellied marmot showed up in Aurora, at a gas station near the Denver International Airport. He had originated in Gothic, a few miles north of Crested Butte, but he did not have a boarding pass or specific travel plans for his journey to the Front Range. Turns out, he just liked snuggling up against a warm engine on a cool summer night.

While no marmots have been reported at DIA this year, there have been plenty of other accidental marmot transplants and some tragic accidents too, says Blumstein. He has been studying marmots all over the world, including Pakistan, where he finished his Ph.D. on the personable, cat-sized ground squirrels since the late 1980s.

Blumstein explains that it isn't only warm engines that draw marmots in, either.

"Marmots are attracted to cars, and often they go for the radiator and radiator fluid, so often they go up into them and just explore," Blumstein says. "Cars are dark and quiet and they seem like a safe haven. Occasionally, they get in cars and they get moved around. It's been happening for a long time, but it's certainly happening much more now."

On the occasion at DIA 12 years ago, Blumstein says he got a call from what was formerly the Colorado Division of Wildlife (now Colorado Parks and Wildlife) that a marmot had shown up there. "They asked if the tag on it matched one of ours, and we identified it as a male yearling that had last been seen exploring a car in a campground," says Blumstein.

Blumstein says marmots dispersing themselves a bit is pretty common, although they are best left to do it on their own four feet.

The yellow-bellied marmot population of Gothic has been the subject of study at Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL), a non-profit field station in Gothic, since 1962. Blumstein is a professor in the department of ecology and evolutionary biology at UCLA, and took the reins of marmot studies at RMBL in 2001. He says that researchers have studied thousands of marmots over the years, and estimates there are about 120 marmots there this summer.

“The whole marmot population exists because they are part of what’s known as meta populations—a large population that is divided up into smaller sub-populations. The whole population can be doing well as long as these smaller populations are doing well and as long as marmots can move between the sub-populations. If they are moving out of Gothic, that potentially has more negative ramifications for them,” says Blumstein.

It appears the population of marmots is increasing around Crested Butte, including a recent newcomer that has settled near veterinarian Laura Ramos’ Animal Hospital on Belleview Avenue.

Marmot research coming out of RMBL has shown that yellow-bellied marmots have a matrilineal social order, where mother-daughter-sister associations and kin groups may continue for several generations. Still, as many as half of the females do disperse, and almost all males disperse to other areas to mate and establish burrows.

“There is a dispersal season, a time when some of them are trying to move around or away,” says Blumstein. He says these marmots have a remarkable distribution, including an almost 15,000-foot elevation range throughout the Western North Hemisphere. “In Colorado they have almost a 10,000-foot range,” he says.

When marmots are exploring their habitat, they often cross roadways, explore cars and encounter humans. While maintaining a respectful distance and observing the cute critters is understandable, Blumstein says, humans should be mindful of these wild animals.

“Someone called me and asked, ‘What do I do, there’s a marmot in my garden!’ And I told them, just be thankful. There’s a marmot in your garden,” quips Blumstein. He jokes further that when you summit a tall mountain, it almost makes sense to share your sandwich with marmots since you are, after all, a visitor in their home and eating in front of them.

But while marmots can be charming and funny, Blumstein points out that you should never really feed any wildlife and “It’s not funny when one gets killed, or when a person’s car gets damaged.”

Marmots can do a lot of damage to cars, they can be displaced to a habitat in which they do not know how to adapt, and they can become pests if they learn to view humans as safe sources for food, says Blumstein.

“They become problem animals. But there really are no problem animals because we humans define the problem—thus, there’s a problem person. But the animal always loses,” says Blumstein. “We have marmot pups and yearlings climbing in cars... and they get moved away. One accidental disperser caused more

than \$1,000 by climbing around in someone's car in Crested Butte. And we've been having more of them run over every year too. At least two this year have been killed by cars."

Of the DIA incident, Blumstein admits, "It didn't end well, but at least we knew where he went."

For those visiting Gothic and any other marmot habitats—including the tops of our iconic Fourteeners—Blumstein asks that people be careful and pay close attention to marmots. "Please drive slowly around Gothic, where we've been studying these for 58 years and every life is important to us. Keep dogs on leashes, check your cars before you drive away, and don't feed them."

There are signs at parking areas near the Gothic area reminding people of these tips as well. And if you or a dog do get too close, you may hear the characteristic chirp or whistle marmots make to alert each other of potential danger. This is the reason for their nickname, "whistle pig."

More information about yellow-bellied marmots and what scientists are learning from them can be found at rmb1.org and you can learn more about the RMBL marmot study at Blumstein's Marmots of RMBL website (<https://sites.lifesci.ucla.edu/eeb-rmb1-marmots/>).