



ALPINE ALERTS

**Where the
Whistle Pig
Sings**

BY JEANNINE DARNELL



Dedicated to my daddy,
John C. Garralda
for teaching me about libraries,
the Colorado back country, and
“whistle pigs”.

All marmot photos taken by Jeannine Darnell
on Mount Blue Sky and in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado
in the Summer of 2024.

Hobbs, Gregory J., Jr. “Red Rocks.” *Colorado: Mother of Rivers*,
Colorado Foundation for Water Education, 2005, pp. 26-27.

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YELLOW-BELLIED MARMOTS (*Marmota Flaviventris*)

Colloquially known as “Whistle Pigs,” this largest member of the squirrel family lives in high, rocky, open places with nearby grassy areas throughout the Rocky Mountains.

While some colonies can be found at 6,000 feet of elevation, in Colorado, marmots prefer the alpine tundra above 11,500 feet.

Marmots are generally about the same size as a small cat. Their weight drastically fluctuates between 4 pounds in early spring and 12 pounds in early autumn. They are usually 18 to 24 inches long and have a 5 to 8 inch long tail.





Their fur has coarse, long out hairs with some guard hairs having a pale tip with a dark band. They have bright yellow fur on their belly, sides of the neck, and throat and a white patch on the snout in front of their eyes. Their backs are generally reddish-brown. Their ears are small and round.



Highly social creatures, marmots live in colonies. They burrow beneath the rocks as protection from predators. When a predator is spotted, the marmot will emit a piercing whistle to warn the others in the area. They will then hide in the rocks until the threat has passed.

This whistle earned these critters the nickname “Whistle Pigs” from early settlers.





Marmots spend about 80% of their lives in their burrows. Approximately 60% of that time is spent hibernating. Their hibernation period can vary with elevation although it is typically from September until May. They do not store food for the winter. Instead, they spend their active season replenishing their fat stores to survive hibernation. They mostly feed on grass, grains, leaves, flowers, legumes, bird eggs, and insects.





*“Now each of us has had a day
we’ve done our best and worst,
said our share of lying
and placing mankind first,
we’ve but to see that lupine
is the future at our feet
and marmots running sprightly
over Rocky Mountain peaks.”*

from “Red Rocks”
by Gregory J. Hobbs, Jr.





May the marmot's whistle
be your alpine anthem.