

Fact and Opinion

by Stephan MacLEOD

FACT: Vancouver Island marmots (scientists know this animal as *Marmota vancouverensis*) live only in the high mountains of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, Canada and nowhere else in the world.

OPINION: Atlantic Canada used to have a large marmot population, but they all headed west to get work.

FACT: Marmots are the largest members of the squirrel family. Adults typically grow as large as a big housecat (about 5 to 7 kilograms).

OPINION: If I saw a squirrel that big, I would not want it going after my nuts.

FACT: All of the world's 14 marmot species build elaborate underground burrows, hibernate during winter, and feed on grasses and flowers.

OPINION: Sounds like a description of most of those damn hippies in Vancouver.

FACT: Some marmot species live in mountainous regions - the Latin name "Marmota" actually translates into "mountain mouse".

OPINION: The Latin name "vancouverensis" actually translates into "Terry David Mulligan doesn't have a penis". Go figure.

FACT: Most species are highly social creatures that live in colonies.

OPINION: You can tell the "mountain rat" is social by the way it humps your leg. You can tell it lives in colonies when a whole bunch of them ruin your good pants.

FACT: Three other marmot species are found in Canada (the Woodchuck,

Yellow-bellied marmot and Hoary marmot).

OPINION: The Hoary marmot lost a "W" when it stopped charging for sex and started doing it for free.

FACT: Vancouver Island marmots are easily distinguished from other marmots by their rich chocolate-brown fur and contrasting white patches. There are other differences as well — genetic, behavioral and ecological — they even sound unique!

OPINION: They make really original sounds when you sit on them.

FACT: Apart from being unusual and lovely, *Marmota vancouverensis* has the dubious distinction of being the world's rarest marmot. In fact, with a population containing fewer than 100 individuals, this engaging rodent ranks as one of the world's rarest mammals.

OPINION: So please, watch where you are sitting.

FACT: Certainly the immediate problem is clear: there just aren't enough marmots left to go around! In fact, the population collapsed from over 300 animals during the mid-1980s to fewer than 100 today (including some now in captivity).

OPINION: In order to preserve the Vancouver Island marmot population, my family only eats one marmot for Thanksgiving instead of our usual three. It's the least we could do.

FACT: Vancouver Island marmots are gone from most areas that they once inhabited. In a few cases disappearances apparently occurred hundreds or thousands of years ago. These are almost certainly the result of long-

term changes in climate and vegetation. But most extinctions happened within the past few decades, and a frightening number occurred since the 1980s.

OPINION: I blame Loverboy.

FACT: Only a handful of the 30-plus colonies that were active in 1984 still have marmots. Several are now so small that individuals probably won't find a mate even if they manage to survive.

OPINION: Jesus, why don't they just go down to The Bar.

FACT: The paradox is that this species successfully colonized man-habitats created by clear-cut logging of high elevation forests during the 1980-90s. This allowed dramatic but temporary increases in a small area (mostly on four adjacent mountains). In some years more marmots lived in these clear-cuts than in the nearby natural sub-alpine meadows.

OPINION: You don't suppose it was the trees that were killing the marmots?

FACT: It now appears likely that forestry contributed to the recent downfall of *Marmota vancouverensis*.

OPINION: Obviously the little bastards didn't like trees. Why blame those poor souls who were trying to save the marmots by chopping down those nasty forests?

FACT: One effect of clear-cut logging was to create new habitat that encouraged dispersing "teenagers" to stop in nearby "easy" (fresh clear-cuts resemble the natural sub-alpine meadows). By doing so these individuals didn't

get to more far-flung places, where they might have provided new mate-choices for residents. Scientists would describe this as "altering the landscape connectivity" for marmots.

OPINION: Fucking scientists would say something stupid like that. Why don't they just call it like it is: "a severe case of blue balls".

FACT: This wouldn't be a bad thing, if marmots were as successful in clear-cuts. But for a variety of reasons they're not (they apparently die more often during hibernation and/or are killed more often by predators). Scientists would describe this as creating poor quality habitats that function as a population "sink".

OPINION: Goddamn scientific jargon. Speak English, doctor! How can they expect me to care about the little marmot when they keep using words like "sink"?

FACT: It remains unclear which predators are most important, or whether disease outbreaks have occurred. But theory tells us that a concentrated population is much more vulnerable than a widely-distributed one. And when you get down to these kinds of population numbers, every death is important.

OPINION: I blame violence on television and video games.

FACT: Vancouver Island marmots communicate by physical contact and by whistling. Their most frequent call is a high-pitched whistle, which warns colony members of danger. Hence one local nickname, "whistle pig".

OPINION: That was my nickname in highschool. Except instead of "whistle" it was "ass".

