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Thursday, July 2, 2015

# OUTDOORS

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Field technician Adam Starechski sets and camouflages a marmot trap in the Mission Mountains. Starechski is part of a research team studying marmot populations in Montana. COURTESY PHOTO

## Researchers look at genetics of marmots

By Erin Madison  
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Ask anyone who has hiked in Glacier National Park if they've seen a marmot and the answer is probably yes.

Hoary marmots are a common sight in Glacier and in many of Montana's mountain ranges, but relatively little is known about the animals.

"They're familiar to everyone, but they haven't been studied that much," said Dr. Steven Kalinowski, professor of ecology at Montana State University.

A research team at MSU, in partnership with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, is working to change that.

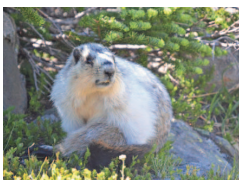
FWP biologist John Vore started studying marmots in the 1990s. "I've always had an interest in marmots," said Vore, who now works as game management bureau chief for FWP. "I like them because of where they live. ... They're just really neat little animals."

In Montana, hoary marmots are typically found above 6,500 feet.

"They're alpine obligates, meaning they only live up in the alpine," he said.

The places hoary marmots live are hard to access. They live high in the mountains where snow covers the ground most of the year. That's likely part of why few studies have been done on the animals.

See MARMOTS, 40



A hoary marmot in Glacier National Park. NPS PHOTO



Kaitlin MacDonald and Jonathan Hashisaki, technicians with Montana State University's marmot research project, carry marmot traps on their packs while hiking. COURTESY PHOTO

## FWP removes 2 bighorn sheep in Malta area

By Tribune Staff

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks removed two young bighorn rams found commingling with domestic sheep last week.

The bighorns were 28 miles south of Malta, well away from their normal habitat. The meat from the sheep was donated to local families, and the horns will be used for educational purposes.

The two rams were found on private land along Beaver Creek in southern Phillips County. They were 22 miles from established populations in hunting district 622 in the Missouri River Breaks, and 25 miles



Bighorn sheep near Wolf Creek. COURTESY PHOTO

from populations in the Little Rockies in hunting district 620. Neighbors alerted FWP about the rams after observing them in close proximity to domestic sheep, including within an enclosed pen.

With landowner permission to access the property, FWP's Malta area Wildlife Biologist Scott Thompson removed the bighorns on June 24.

"Bighorn sheep are managed pretty intensively," said Thompson. "To keep a healthy population of bighorn sheep, more

See SHEEP, 20

## Great Falls man completes the Spartan Trifecta in 5 months

By Erin Madison  
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Great Falls dentist Dr. Eugene Tynes knows that many people find Spartan races to be intimidating, but he would encourage anyone to give them a try. "I think a lot of people are afraid of it, and they don't need to be," Tynes said.

Tynes certainly isn't afraid of doing a Spartan race. In fact, he already did three in 2015, earning a Spartan Trifecta medal. Spartan races challenge athletes to run through a course, conquering obstacles and navigating through mud pits along the way. The races come in three distances — the Sprint, the Super and the Beast, which is about 13 miles long with 30 obstacles. Doing all three distances in a calendar year is called a Spartan Trifecta.



Great Falls dentist Eugene Tynes, right, completed a Spartan Trifecta with his friend Brett Weber, left. A Spartan Trifecta is doing all three Spartan distances in a calendar year. COURTESY PHOTO

Tynes didn't waste any time earning his trifecta. He did the Spartan Sprint in February; the Super in April and the Beast in May.

"We wanted to see how quickly we could get it done," he said. Tynes did his first Spartan race three years ago. "The only one they of-

fered in Montana was the Sprint," he said. He was instantly hooked. Tynes has always enjoyed a challenge. He ran across the Bob Marshall Wilderness once.

"For me, I love it," he said of Spartan races. "I'm

See TRIFECTA, 20



FWP PHOTO  
Singing "sweet, sweet, summer's sweet," yellow warblers are a common summer visitor to Montana.

## Stop and appreciate songbirds

There is something about songbirds this time of year that can catch the ear, eye and heart of even the most preoccupied person.

It doesn't matter where: mountain tops, middle of the prairie, downtown, uptown.

It doesn't matter what you call them: twenty birds, little brown jobs, neotropical migrants.

Songbirds are nesting, raising young and singing their blessed little hearts out.

Sure a dedicated birder with keen hearing can tell the difference between the songs of a savannah sparrow and vesper sparrow. Or with a quick glance through binoculars identify a chestnut-collared longspur atop a bit of sagebrush at 100 yards.

Good for those bird watchers who rise at dawn and drive lonely country roads to look, listen and count.

For the rest of us, sometimes appreciation is just the ability to be in the moment. Stop. Look around. Listen.

In reality, listening for the musical notes of a songbird in town is difficult and not just because of our man-made sounds. English house sparrows and European starlings, neither of which is native, can drown out and drive out many native songbirds. And not many of us would list the songs of house sparrows as melodic; too much monotonous chirping.

Even so, in Montana's largest cities there are still mourning doves cooing and yellow warblers singing out their "sweet, sweet, summer's sweet."

Yes, technically mourning doves are not songbirds. But they are native and produce a wonderful cooing, or mourning sound, that's often associated with cool summer mornings.

The best bet is head to the outskirts of town, whether to the forest, prairie or along a river. Take a pair of binoculars, a good bird book, and maybe a bottle of mosquito repellent.

Then, do as your mother probably asked of you, sit down and be quiet.

Within a few minutes the air will fill with a symphony of shrill notes, pulsing trills and jingling, metallic melodies. Shortly thereafter, a bit of bright color will likely glance nearby.

The best time of day is dawn, but even midmorning can work. Mostly what you will look for and listen to are the males. They are flashy as they try to attract females to them, and they sing with the same purpose in mind.

Just a few ounces of feathers and bones, yet songbirds could give lessons to opera singers. And without meaning to, they make our day better. They pay us no mind, but their voices give us dividends.

Don't put off a chance to brighten your day. Some of those wonderful little bits of feathers will be heading south in a couple of months. Make now the moment. Carpe diem.

Bruce Auchly is the information officer for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 4 in Great Falls.

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THURSDAY, JULY 2, 2015

## Marmots

Continued from 10

"They're a species that we don't know a lot about as far as their distribution or numbers on the landscape," Vore added.

While working in the field as an FWP biologist, Vore began to document where he saw hoary marmots.

"I started paying attention and logging where I found marmot colonies," he said.

A few years ago, MSU joined his efforts.

One of the big questions MSU researchers aim to answer is how interconnected are the marmot colonies found throughout Montana's mountain ranges?

Researchers are looking at the high alpine areas where marmots live as islands in the sky, explained Dr. Andrea Lutz, professor of ecology at MSU.

"Can they move from island to island?" she asked. If they can't and marmot colonies are isolated, are the animals interbreeding?

Marmots are potentially a species of concern because little is known about their range or their population numbers, said Ben Turnock, an MSU master's student who is working on the marmot research project.

"We know that in Glacier they're a permanent resident," he said.

However, in other areas are they also permanent or do colonies ever disappear?

Turnock also wants to know how far marmots can and do travel. Can the Glacier population cross Highway 2? Is the North Fork Flathead River a physical boundary for them?

"Can a marmot swim across something like that?" he asked.

To answer those questions, Turnock, along with three field technicians, spent last summer traveling to high mountain areas and trapping marmots. He'll do the same thing this summer.

The crew uses live traps to capture the animals. Once the marmots are in the traps, they use a capture bag to securely hold the animal while they take about 1 millimeter of tissue from the marmot's ear.

"We're collecting small tissue samples," Turnock said.

Those tissue samples will be used for DNA testing, which will help determine how interconnected marmots are throughout Montana.

While trapping marmots, the crew also works to gain a better understanding of the habitat marmots prefer. Marmots seem to live in large boulder fields with large boulders. It seems that having meadows nearby is also important.

"We think they're doing a lot of their foraging in those areas," Turnock said.

The crew is also trying to determine what kind of access to water marmots



Marmot researchers set up the first trap line of the season early in June 2014 on Werner Peak in the Whitefish Range. Hoary marmots live in high alpine habitats that are covered by snow most of the year.



A hoary marmot is held in a capture bag. Researchers take a small piece of the animal's ear as a DNA sample.

need. In many alpine areas, streams don't flow year-round.

The marmots that can often be seen on Great Falls' golf courses or along the Missouri are yellow bellied marmots.

"Hoary marmots are a different beast than the yellow bellied marmots," Vore said.

Hoary marmots can be found all the way from Alaska to Montana. Montana is the southern edge of their range. Typically, they're not seen south of the Beaverhead Mountains, and usually aren't found east of the Continental Divide.

"There are a few on the east side of the Divide, but the don't get very far on the east side of the Divide," Vore said.

Researching marmots is

challenging work.

"It's hard to get to some of these places," Lutz said.

Last summer, Turnock and his crew spent 53 days in the backcountry.

"Over those 53 days, we hiked 215 miles," he said.

They also climbed 89,000 feet of elevation.

Trapping marmots proved more challenging than Turnock expected.

"It was harder than we had anticipated," he said.

In the first month of trapping marmots, they only captured three animals. In the last month, they got 10 marmots.

"We got a lot better," Turnock said.

In all, the researchers have collected 20 tissue samples from 20 different marmots in four different mountain ranges. They'll

continue their efforts this summer and begin DNA sequencing this fall.

By the end of the project, researchers hope to have tissue samples from marmots in Glacier, the Whitefish Range, and the Mission, Swan, Anaconda-Pintler and Bitterroot mountains.

One of the goals of the research is also to develop a protocol to use in order to monitor marmots long term.

As a Ph.D. candidate,

Kalinowski worked on a similar project working to study bighorn sheep. It used to be thought that separate mountain ranges had isolated populations of bighorn sheep and that the animals didn't travel between herds. DNA proved that to be wrong.

"It really changed how people looked at bighorns," Kalinowski said.

The marmot research has the potential to be equally impactful.

Erin Madison is the outdoors writer at the Great Falls Tribune. She can be reached at 406-791-1466 or emadison@greatfallstribune.com. Follow her on Twitter @GFTrib\_EMadison.



## CONTEST RULES

If you can identify this Montana scene, you could win a gift certificate from the Tribune.

Tribune Capitol Bureau chief Kristen Inbody took this photo.

Identifications should be specific, such as naming one of the features in the photo or giving a specific location.

Contest entries must be received by 5 p.m. Monday. Email your guess to

triboutdoors@greatfallstribune.com or fax them to 791-1431. Include your name, address and daytime phone. Or send it to:

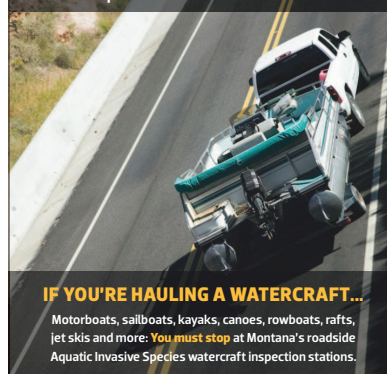
Can you find it?  
c/o Erin Madison  
Great Falls Tribune  
P.O. Box 5468  
Great Falls, MT 59403  
Guesses are not accepted over the phone.



**LAST WEEK:** A few readers recognized that elaborate trail marker located about halfway up the Clary Coulee Trail on the Rocky Mountain Front. Of those, we drew Mike Biggle of Great Falls as this week's winner.

## We need your help:

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