

Northern pocket gopher

Thomomys talpoides

By Julie Lue



SCIENTIFIC NAME *Thomomys* is a combination of two Greek words meaning “heap” and “mouse.” *Talpoides* is Latin for “molelike.”

When spring arrives and snow melts off the hill behind my house, I find tubelike castings of soil, like giant snakes, lying on the ground, and I stumble over crescent-shaped mounds of dirt between clumps of bluebunch wheatgrass and arrowleaf balsamroot. These signs tell me I have a resident northern pocket gopher.

But I have never seen a gopher. Not one.

Sure, I’ve seen hundreds of those cute little colony-dwellers that stand next to their burrows, watching for danger. I used to think they were gophers. But they’re not; they’re ground squirrels, usually one of four species—Wyoming, Uinta, Richardson’s, or Columbian—that can be tough to tell apart. I’ve also seen those larger, chunkier rodents with short tails that live in denser colonies called “towns.” They’re prairie dogs, either black-tailed or white-tailed, both state species of concern.

Montana’s actual gophers—the northern and Idaho pocket gophers—are much harder to see. They spend most of their lives tunneling in the dark. Their soil mounds and “snakes” might lead you to suspect the presence of moles, but no moles live in Montana.

APPEARANCE

Northern pocket gophers are stocky rodents, 8 inches long and usually weighing about 3 to 5 ounces, with a cylindrical body and a short, sensitive tail that helps them navigate while backing up in tunnels. Their fur, reddish-brown on top and grayish below, is soft and pliable, and their skin is loose, allowing

them to turn around more easily in tight quarters. Pocket gophers have small eyes and ears, and they can close their lips behind their large incisors, which they use for digging, along with long front claws. The species’ common name refers to their fur-lined cheek “pockets,” which are used to carry food and bedding.

RANGE AND HABITAT

Northern pocket gophers’ range includes much of the western United States, including all of Montana, and parts of western Canada. They live as far north as central Alberta and as far south as central New Mexico. The rodents prefer areas with deep soils where tunnels will hold their shape and not become waterlogged or flooded. They live at almost any elevation, including alpine areas.

FOOD

Pocket gophers mostly eat the underground parts of plants—bulbs, corms, and roots—which they access through their tunnels.

BEHAVIOR

The anti-social pocket gopher does not share its burrow except during breeding season, when the female allows a male to visit. After a gestation period of just under three weeks, she gives birth to four or five young, which will be independent and out of the burrow by two months.

A lone pocket gopher’s tunnel system can stretch hundreds of feet. It digs a vertical tunnel every so often for discarding soil,

creating crescent-shaped mounds. It plugs the entrance with dirt to keep weasels and other predators out. Various chambers in the burrow are used as a nest, food cache, and latrine. In winter, the pocket gopher also burrows through snow and jams loose soil from underground into the snow tunnels. This creates the castings visible after snowmelt.

Though pocket gophers can damage gardens, lawns, crops, and orchards, they often improve plant diversity and productivity. The rodents till, aerate, and incorporate organic matter into soil. On the alpine tundra, “gopher gardens” are known for their spectacular wildflower blooms, including the bluish-purple sky pilot.

Pocket gophers, which do not hibernate, remain active year round.

A pocket gopher’s urge to dig is strong. Kerry Foresman, professor emeritus of biology at the University of Montana and author of *Mammals of Montana*, says that when live-trapping shrews in pitfall traps—coffee cans recessed into the ground—he also captured many pocket gophers. “They never attempted to stand up and climb out of the can, which they were large enough to do, but rather continued to try and dig out through the bottom,” he says. He released them unharmed.

CONSERVATION

In Montana, the northern pocket gopher is considered common, and in some situations, a pest. The similar-looking Idaho pocket gopher, a potential species of concern, has been observed in parts of Ravalli, Beaverhead, and Madison counties. 🐹

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