

For many of us, our only image of lemmings is a pack of fuzzy creatures hurling themselves off a cliff into the sea. Happily, this is a myth. While it is true that a few species of lemmings, in periods of explosive population growth, do set out for new terrain in migratory swarms—and occasionally drown—no species of lemming commits mass suicide.

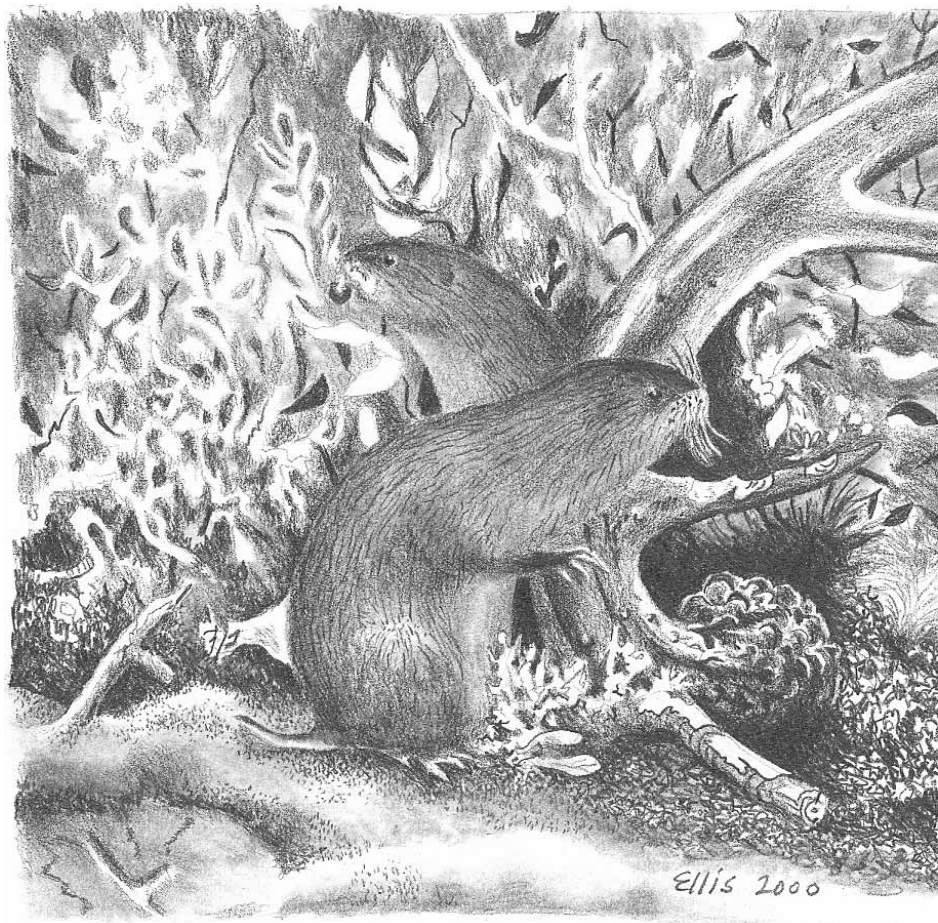
The northern bog lemming, *Synaptomys borealis*, defies the myth further: it neither migrates nor is it even a true lemming, being only a distant relative of the genus *Lemmus*. Nevertheless, this thickset, grizzled rodent is mostly true to its name, living in cold bogs, under sphagnum mounds and in old logs, from Labrador to Hudson Bay and across Canada to the Pacific and Alaska. At the southern edge of its range, it occurs in scattered sites in Maine,

New Hampshire, Minnesota, Montana, Idaho, and Washington. Genetic isolation is a concern in these subpopulations, and, although it has not been federally protected under the Endangered Species Act, the animal is listed as Threatened by several state wildlife agencies.

Want to find a bog lemming? It may be easier to catch a bird by salting its tail. Field naturalists describe *S. borealis* as “elusive,” “isolated and local,” and “seldom seen.” Scientists studying a population on Mount Katahdin explored whether the lemmings suffered from limited habitat or were edged out by other small mammals. Neither proved to be the case, leaving them to wonder if the northern bog lemming is simply an example of “rarity, an important natural phenomenon.”

To help in the search, bog specialists tell us to look for two tell-tale signs: “sedge stems clipped about an inch long and heaped like miniature log piles near their travel lanes” and

A Rare and Splendid Rodent



“bright green droppings, often at special manuring spots, by-products of diets heavy in herbs.” (While mostly herbivorous, bog lemmings will eat the occasional snail or slug that crosses their path.)

Like other northern species, *Synaptomys borealis* has several adaptations to the cold. Most noteworthy is the enlargement of its middle claws in the wintertime, thought to aid in digging through snow and frozen ground. Its long and loose pelage provides insulation. Northern bog lemmings also adapt to the onset of winter by giving up their surface runways for large networks of underground burrows. Remarkably, they neither hibernate nor show any signs of winter torpor, and may be found scuttling about day or night year-round.

The myth of the suicidal follower, trailing its neighbor over the edge, misrepresents these secretive creatures. But we may do well to keep alive the expression, “like a swarm of lemmings,” in this era of *our own* ecological cliff rushing.

—JOSHUA BROWN

QUOTED SOURCES: Johnson, Charles W. 1985. Bogs of the Northeast. Hanover: UP of New England. Clough, Garrett C. and John J. Albright. 1987. Occurrence of the Northern Bog Lemming, *Synaptomys borealis*, in the Northeastern United States. Canadian Field-Naturalist 101(4) 611–613.