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Magazine for Members of the Swiss Society of New Zealand Inc

## FLORA/FAUNA IN SWITZERLAND

# The Alpine Marmot (*Marmota marmota*)

The Alpine Marmot (*Marmota marmota*) is found in mountainous areas of central and southern Europe at heights between 800 and 3,200 metre. They were reintroduced with success in the Pyrenees in 1948, where the Alpine Marmot had disappeared thousands of years ago.

They spend up to nine months per year in hibernation. An adult Alpine Marmot may weigh between 4 and 8 kg and reach between 42–54 cm in length (not including the tail, which measures between 13–16 cm on average).

Alpine Marmots eat plants such as grasses and herbs, as well as grain, insects, spiders and worms. They hold food in their forepaws while eating. They mainly emerge from their burrows to engage in feeding during the morning and afternoon, as they are not well suited to heat, which may result in them not feeding at all on very warm days. When the weather is suitable, they will consume large amounts of food in order to create a layer of fat on their body, enabling them to survive their long hibernation period.

When creating a burrow, they use both their forepaws and hind feet to assist in the work—the forepaws scrape away the soil, which is then pushed out of the way by the hind feet. If there are any stones in the way, providing they aren't too large, the Alpine Marmot will remove them with its teeth.

"Living areas" are created at the end of a burrow, and are often lined with dried hay, grass and plant stems. Any other burrow tunnels that go nowhere are used as toilet areas. Once burrows have been completed, they only host one family, but are often enlarged by the next generation, sometimes creating very complex burrows over time. Al-

pine Marmots are very defensive against intruders, and will warn them off using intimidating behavior, such as beating of the tail and chattering of the teeth, and by marking their territory with their scent.

One can often see an Alpine Marmot "standing" while they keep a look-out for potential predators or other dangers. If one is spotted, they will emit a loud whistle or chirp—one whistle is given for possible airborne predators, more for ground predators.

The mating season for Alpine Marmots occurs in the spring, right after their hibernation period comes to a close, which gives their offspring the highest possible chance of surviving the coming winter. Alpine Marmots are able to breed once they reach an age of two years.

As the summer draws to an end, Alpine Marmots will gather old stems in their burrows in order to serve as bedding for their impending hibernation, which can start as early as October. They seal the burrow with a combination of earth and their own faeces.

Once winter arrives, the Alpine Marmots will huddle next to each other, and begin hibernation, a process which lowers their heart rate down to five beats per minute, and breathing down to 1–3 breaths per minute, which uses up their stored fat supplies as slowly as possible. Their body temperature will drop to almost the same as the air around them, although their heart rate and breathing will speed up if they approach freezing point.

Although not currently in any danger of extinction, Alpine Marmots used to be widely hunted due to the belief that their fat would ease rheumatism when rubbed on the skin.

*from Wikipedia*

