

Golden-Mantled Ground Squirrel

(Spermophilus lateralis)

OCCASIONALLY HIKERS in Glacier or Yellowstone national parks will report seeing a “giant chipmunk.” What they probably saw was a golden-mantled ground squirrel.

APPEARANCE

It's no wonder people mistake the golden-mantled ground squirrel for a chipmunk on steroids. Both have black stripes running down their back and both can be downright brazen in their attempts to get food from hikers and picnickers. The biggest physical difference between the two is size. A chipmunk runs about 8 inches long and weighs around 2 ounces, while a golden-mantled ground squirrel is 9 to 12 inches long and weighs between 4 and 14 ounces. The squirrel's back is brownish gray, with one white stripe bordered by black stripes running down each side. Unlike the chipmunk, the golden-mantled ground squirrel's stripes don't extend up to its face. The squirrel's name comes from the golden brown or russet mantle over its head and

shoulders. Whitish fur rings the eyes. To clean its brightly colored fur, the squirrel rolls in dust and preens with its claws.

FOOD

Scientists classify the golden-mantled ground squirrel as a true ground squirrel, though it will climb trees to reach seeds. Its genus name *Spermophilus* is Greek for “seed loving.” Like other ground squirrels, the golden-mantle packs seeds and fruit in its cheek pouches and stores the food in burrows, puts on a thick layer of fat, and hibernates in winter. Golden-mantled ground squirrels eat their stored food in early spring, when seeds and fruit are scarce. Some biologists believe that the animals may also awaken at times during the winter to feed on their cache. In captivity, hibernating golden-mantled ground squirrels woke for a short time every two weeks. In addition to seeds and fruit, the omnivorous ground squirrels eat fungi, forbs, insects, bird eggs, small vertebrates, and carrion.

SOUND

Though the golden-mantled ground squirrel remains silent most of the time, it can vocalize. When alarmed, it chirps and squeals. Though not especially aggressive, it will growl when fighting with other ground squirrels.

BEHAVIOR

The golden-mantled ground squirrel's annual cycle of life is to eat through the short summer and get fat, sleep all winter, wake up and breed, then do it all over again. An easy way for the squirrels to get food is by begging from hikers. Though tempting, it's not a good idea to feed these or any other wild animals. It distracts them from searching for natural foods, which they must eat in large quantities to survive. Unlike most other Montana ground squirrels, the golden-mantle is a loner. It only spends time with others of its kind as a youngster with its mother and siblings.

REPRODUCTION

Males usually emerge from hibernation a few days earlier than females, anywhere from late March to May, depending on the elevation. Breeding occurs shortly after the females emerge. Following a gestation period of 28 days, a female produces a litter of roughly five young, which she rears in a nest within an underground burrow. Newborn golden-mantled ground squirrels are naked and blind. They are weaned after three to six weeks. In late summer, the young head out on their own.

HABITAT

Golden-mantled ground squirrels are commonly found near rocks and talus slopes in mountainous areas across the western United States and Canada. They usually live in coniferous forest openings but can range above timberline. A golden-mantled ground squirrel digs its own burrow, which can extend for 100 feet, usually with an entrance near a log or boulder. Its home range is 1 or 2 acres. Within this area, the squirrels are preyed on by hawks, owls, coyotes, foxes, and bobcats.

STATUS IN MONTANA

The golden-mantled ground squirrel is a nongame species unprotected by regulations. It is common in mid to high elevations of western Montana, so it is not viewed as an agricultural pest, as are some ground squirrels. Carbon County is the farthest east the species has been documented in Montana. 🐿️



JOHN FRALEY

BY JOHN FRALEY

John Fraley is a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks information officer in Kalispell.