



Klamath Network Featured Creature

January 2012

Mountain Beaver (*Aplodontia rufa*)

General Description:

The mountain beaver (*Aplodontia rufa*) belongs to the Aplodontiidae family, in which it is the only living species. The body of the mountain beaver is covered with coarse, dull fir. Adults are colored grayish brown or reddish brown, while young animals are generally darker in color than adults. Adult mountain beavers weigh, on average, 2.3 pounds (1,050g). They range in length from 12-20 inches (30-50cm) and have a rudimentary tail about 1 inch (2.5cm) long. Mountain beavers are primarily nocturnal and terrestrial. They live in underground burrows and occasionally climb shrubs and trees to obtain food. The name mountain beaver is misleading because this species is not a true beaver, nor does it inhabit solely mountain habitats.



(Source: www.dirttime.ws)

Distribution:

First described by Lewis and Clark, mountain beavers are unique to the Pacific Northwest. They are found in Pacific coastal regions from southern British Columbia to northern California. Mountain beavers are distributed westward from the Cascade Mountains and southward into the Sierras. The species is found in low to mid elevations in its range.

Habitat:

Mountain beavers occupy mature forests in openings or thinned stands where there is substantial vegetation in the understory. Their habitat is characteristically dominated by Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*), or red alder (*Alnus rubra*). Within this habitat, mountain beavers favor moist ravines and wooded or bushy hillsides. They live in places with deep soils in order to build their burrow systems.

Mountain beavers construct extensive burrow systems throughout their territories. The tunnels are 6 to 8 inches in diameter and normally extend ½ to 10 feet underground. The burrow systems contain special chambers for nesting, feeding, storing food and storing waste. The tunnel systems may contain 10-30 exit or entrance holes that are left open. Burrow systems may cover an area of ¼ acre or more. Territorial behavior usually limits mountain beaver population densities to about 4 individuals per acre, but population numbers vary based on cover and food availability.

Feeding:

Mountain beavers are strict herbivores. They eat just about any type of succulent vegetation including grasses, ferns, forbs, shrubs, hardwoods and conifers. They also eat plant species that are largely inedible to other wildlife like bracken fern, nettle and salal. Mountain beaver food habits are closely tied to the dominant vegetation in their habitat and most feeding occurs above ground within 50 feet of their burrows. Like their aquatic namesake, mountain beavers have strong incisors. They may cut tree branches and stems up to ¾ inch in diameter. Food is stacked at burrow entrances, allowed time to wilt and then carried to food caches to be eaten later.

Ecology:

Mountain beavers serve an important function in nature owing to the amount of soil they move, and the number of vacant burrows they leave behind for other wildlife. Over time, their old nests, food caches, and waste chambers are buried well below the surface where they become fertilizer for forest vegetation. In addition, unoccupied mountain beaver burrows are used by mice, moles, voles, rats, cottontail rabbits, weasels, mink, spotted skunks, and salamanders.



(Source: www.superstock.com)

Interesting Fact:

The mountain beaver is known to be the world's oldest rodent. Its lineage may be traced back 40 million years. For this reason mountain beavers possess very primitive physiologies. They have inefficient kidneys so they must obtain 2/3 their body weight in water daily to function properly. In addition, they are unable to pant or sweat, and they have low reproduction rates.

Where to see it in the Network:

Visitors may catch a glimpse of the mountain beaver at Redwood National Park and Crater Lake National Park. The mountain beaver subspecies, *A. rufa californica*, is present at Lassen Volcanic National Park. Two other subspecies (*A. rufa pacifica* and *A. rufa rufa*) are also present at Oregon Caves National Monument.