

Mineral King marmots cause problems for cars

Large squirrels like to eat motor wires and hoses

By Nick McClellan
Staff writer

If you choose to hike or camp in Mineral King this summer, the animal most likely to cause damage — and leave you shaking your fist — is not a bear.

Large alpine squirrels known as marmots love to munch on engine wires and hoses. They also drink copious amounts of ethylene glycol, a chemical found in many kinds of automotive antifreeze.

Motorists are going to strange lengths to protect themselves.

"Leaving the hood open makes it lighter in there, makes it less cavelike," said visitor Steve Nelson, a San-



Nick McClellan/Times-Delta

Marmots live at Mineral King, as shown in a Visalia Times-Delta video.

ta Cruz County resident who brought his family to Mineral King Tuesday to hike to Sawtooth Pass. "Since they're ground-dwelling creatures, they like to be in burrows."

Other visitors have tried

surrounding their cars with tarps or chicken wire, officials said.

Mitchell Hauptman, a park ranger stationed at the Mineral King ranger station, said three vehicles have been towed this season because

There are several ways to protect your vehicle from marmots in Mineral King. Among them:

► Leave the hood up — Marmots prefer dark, confined spaces. This won't stop the marmots from entering the vehicle, but they'll stay away from your wide-open engine to avoid predators.

► Use chicken wire — A small, wire fence around your vehicle might do the trick.

However, park ranger

marmot damage rendered them inoperative. Other visitors got off easier, including one who left the following note at the ranger station: "Doesn't look serious, but it took a while to scare him out

Tips

Mitchell Hauptman said marmots have learned to head-butt such obstacles and scurry beneath them — ensuring themselves a private lunch.

► Get a tarp: This appears to be the most effective countermeasure. Driving onto a large tarp and wrapping it around the bottom of the vehicle seems to confuse the marmots — for now.

"I'm sure they'll figure it out," Hauptman said. "They're pretty smart."

of the engine compartment."

Hauptman said the marmot season typically runs from April or May to mid-July or early August. The problem, confined almost entirely to the Mineral King

Get it online

Now playing on the Visalia Times-Delta Web site: Marmots can be a headache for visitors to the Mineral King area of Sequoia National Park. Park employees and an experienced ecologist weigh in on why these large alpine squirrels feel the need to snack on engine parts and fluids. See the video now at www.VisaliaTimesDelta.com/Video.

portion of Sequoia National Park, is the result of humans infringing on the marmot's natural habitat, he said.

Overnight visitors are most vulnerable, he said.

No one knows for sure why marmots find car parts and fluids so appealing, said

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Marmot

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Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks Wildlife Ecologist Harold Werner.

The fluids also don't seem to harm the marmots as they would housepets.

"They seem to become ethylene glycol junkies," Werner said.

Studies indicate that the behavior may stem from a deficiency of natural salts in the Mineral King valley.

The warmth of the car engines may also play a role.

Visitors who fail to protect their vehicles from marmots may find themselves taking one or more home in the engine cavity, Hauptman said.

"I've heard stories of marmots making their way down to L.A.," he

said. "But they're fine. People give us calls, 'We have one of your marmots.'"

His usual response?

"It's their marmot now," Hauptman said. "Marmots don't FedEx well."

Werner said a marmot he had tagged himself made it as far south as Santa Monica. It was caught by animal-control officers in the area and returned to the park.

Deb Schweizer, public informa-

tion officer and fire education specialist at the parks, said Mineral King visitors should check their vehicles before leaving.

"We need to recognize that it is their habitat," she said. "We need to protect wildlife and we can take some basic steps to do that."

And if you find a marmot in your car?

"It'd be nice to get it out," she said.

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