



GROUND SQUIRREL

Spermophilus parryii



Appearance

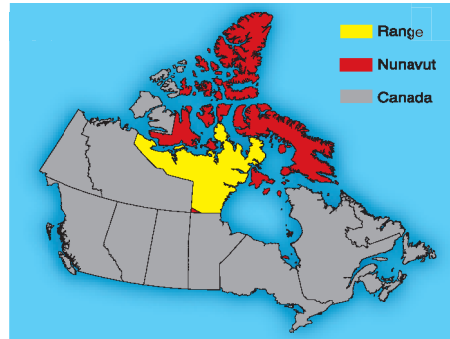
The arctic ground squirrel, or siksik is the largest of all the ground squirrels and also the most northern dwelling squirrel. It has two annual molts, one in June and one in the autumn. The summer coat tends to be more reddish and the winter coat, more greyish. The average weight of a female is generally 700g. The average weight of a male is generally 800g.

Food And Feeding

The arctic ground squirrel is omnivorous. It eats a variety of tundra vegetation such as leaves, seeds, stems, flowers, grass roots and fruit. In addition, it may eat carrion, eggs, other ground squirrels and even some nesting birds.

Behaviour

Arctic ground squirrels are social animals that live in colonies. Adult males will try to control an area that contains more than one female. They kill and eat young ground squirrels from other colonies. Not only does this provide the colony with food it also increases the territory available to future generations. These squirrels wander the tundra and develop a little system of trails. They travel low to the ground and if alarmed, will make a dash for their burrow. They are not afraid of water and will swim across small creek beds that get in their way. The permafrost of the arctic limits ground squirrels to digging shallow tunnels and burrows. Their systems are extensive, sometimes having as many as fifty-six entrances in an area covering 46 square meters. Arctic ground squirrels hibernate for roughly 7 months of the year. Their hibernation dens are lined with a combination of grasses, lichens, leaves and even some caribou or ground squirrel hair. During hibernation, their body temperature drops by more than half they must have enough fat on them to last until April or May when they first start emerging



from their dens. After they emerge, the squirrels feed on a cache of food they stored the summer before as they wait for fresh vegetation to begin growing.

Range

The arctic ground squirrel can be found in the Kivalliq region and in the southern portion of the Kitikmeot region and on Melville Peninsula in the Baffin region.

Habitat

The habitat of the Arctic Ground Squirrel is limited by permafrost. In Nunavut, it is generally restricted to gravel or sandy hills, where the soil drains and prevents permafrost from developing near the surface. Some typical habitats also include eskers, moraines, river-banks, lakeshores, sand banks and meadows.

Reproduction

Arctic ground squirrels breed in May. After a gestation period of about 25 days, they give birth to an average of 6 young. The young are completely helpless but develop quickly. By late summer they leave the family den and go out on their own. Many young ground squirrels die during their first winter as their new dens either flood or are penetrated by permafrost. They reach maturity during the following spring.

Status Survival and Management

According to the Nunavut Wild Species 2000 report, the status of the arctic ground squirrel is secure. The arctic ground squirrel lives for a maximum of 8 to 10 years in the wild. Predators in Nunavut include humans, carnivores and birds. Traditionally, the arctic ground squirrel was used for food and a warm fur lining for the inside of parkas.

Did You Know?

The arctic ground squirrel, as you read above, eats a variety of food including carrion. There is a record of one having carried away about 900g of caribou meat during a single day!

