

# *Marmota himalayana*

No image

**Family:** Himalayan Marmot

**Common names:** Phia,  
Mirgot (Ladakhi)

**Classification:**

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

Family: Sciuridae

Genus: *Marmota*

Species: *himalayana*

**Profile:**

Closely related to prairie dogs and ground squirrels, marmots are the largest ground-dwelling squirrels in the world. Their genus name *Marmota* means 'mountain mouse'. Fourteen species of marmots are found, but only in the Northern Hemisphere. Distributed in the Himalayan region, the Himalayan marmot is roughly the size of a domestic cat. The distinctive feature of the Himalayan marmot is its dark chocolate-brown coat with contrasting yellow patches on the face and chest, which distinguish it from the other marmot species. The Himalayan marmot is one of the highest altitude dwelling mammals in the world. Adapted for an underground life, the animal has a squat body, short neck, short stocky limbs, and a short tail (13-15 cm). The head is flat and triangular with black eyes, long whiskers and small rounded ears. Predominantly plant-eaters, the animals have large beaver-like incisor teeth. The forehead and the tip of the tail are dark brown in colour. The sexes are similar and the animal is about 58-60 cm in length. It weighs around 4-5 kg in summer and may weigh up to 8 kg in autumn. Juveniles resemble the adults. When alarmed, the animals repeatedly make a short, carrying, shrill whistling sound to warn the colony members of danger. Hence, they are also called "whistle pig". A subspecies of the Himalayan marmot, *Marmota himalayana robusta*, weighs over 6 kg and is one of the largest marmots. It is commonly known as the "Tibetan snow pig". Very little information is available about this single subspecies.

**Lifespan:** 8-10 years

**Distribution:** The animal is widely distributed in the Himalayas of Nepal, India, Tibet and Pakistan at elevations of 3500-5200 m. They are also found in certain regions of China such as Qinghai, Xizang, western Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu and Xinjiang. The animal typically inhabits alpine meadows, steppes, and gentle grassy slopes, where the soil can be easily excavated. In India, it is a common resident of the plains of central and south Ladakh and is even more commonly found in eastern and northern Ladakh. It is rarely found in open valleys but mostly inhabits areas at 4000-5000 m.

**Population:** Unestimated. However, the species is believed to be quite common and widely distributed.

**Behaviour:** The Himalayan marmots live in family groups of 10-15 individuals, including an adult male, a couple of adult females, a few sub-adults and the pups. They occupy territories of 2000-3000 m<sup>2</sup>, marked daily with slimy secretions from the chin gland. The animals are diurnal and feed intensively in the mornings and evenings, resting during the afternoons. They dig out burrows that continue to be used for several years. The burrow usually has 2-3 entrances and descends 4-6 m in to the ground. Small, shallow burrows are dug in the vicinity to serve as hiding places in case of danger. When alarmed or curious, the animal stands up on its haunches and if the danger persists, it gives a shrill warning call that makes all the family members rush into the nearest burrow entrance. The animal takes a long time to emerge from the burrow after it has been alarmed. When directly threatened, it ejects a foul stinky substance from the anal gland. The natural predators include the snow leopard, wolf, lynx, fox, wild dog, bear and the golden eagle. In a year, only 60% of the mature females breed and they are receptive for a single day alone. Mating takes place within the burrows, often with several males. The female alone takes care of the young. The young

open their eyes at 3 weeks and venture out after another 3 weeks. They are fully grown at 2 years. By early October, marmots retreat into their burrows for 6-7 months of hibernation. The burrow entrances are tightly plugged with soil, grass, and stones and the animals stay huddled together. Their metabolism slows down remarkably and body temperature falls to 5-7°C. About once a month, the animal wakes up to defecate and urinate. About half the body weight is lost during hibernation.

- **Diet:** They feed predominantly on grass and herbs. They do not store food for the winter.
- **Reproduction:** Breeding season: April-May; Gestation period: 33-34 days; Litter size: 2-7; Weaning: 4 weeks; Sexual maturity: 3 years (both male and females)

**Current status:**

- **Status:**
  1. IUCN 2008: Least Concern
  2. CITES 2008: Listed in Appendix II
- **Threats:**

There are no major threats to the animal as such. Some of the common threats include:

  1. Hunting for food and local medicinal use.
  2. Killing by domestic predators.
  3. Habitat disturbance due to overgrazing by domestic livestock.
- **Conservation practices:**
  1. The Himalayan marmot is included in the Schedule II (Part II) of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972.
  2. The species occurs within several protected areas. For example, it occurs in the Annapurna National Park as well as three other protected areas in Nepal.