



# ***WEST MARIN WILD***

**By Jeff Miller**

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North America's answer to the wombat has got to be the mountain beaver. For years I refused to believe such a critter existed. Having been duped as a lad in the Boy Scouts into many a "snipe hunt" I wasn't about to search for some mythical mountain beaver. As it turns out, mountain beavers, bless their nocturnal little subterranean souls, truly do exist and West Marin is home to a unique species of this most bizarre mammal.

Mountain beavers are primitive rodents most closely related to squirrels. Adults are the size of a gopher on steroids and resemble a tailless muskrat. They live underground in elaborate labyrinthine burrow systems dug into moist soils under dense coastal scrub thickets, complete with a soft nest and separate chambers for storing food, fecal matter and "mountain beaver baseballs," gnawed round chunks of stone or clay.

Although capable of climbing trees, these secretive creatures rarely leave or travel far from their cool moist burrows, and then only to indulge their favorite pastime, eating. They will gorge themselves on the most toxic, nastiest tasting, unpalatable plants imaginable, such as cow parsnip, poison oak, foxglove, larkspur and skunk cabbage. Mountain beavers have succeeded for over 40 million years because they occupy what scientists would call a "largely uncontested food niche." Mountain beavers also have a drinking problem. Due to their inefficient kidneys, they must daily consume one-third their body weight in water, by drinking or from food.

Seven subspecies of mountain beaver live throughout the Pacific Northwest, four endemic to California. The **Point Reyes Mountain Beaver** (*Alpodontia rufa phaea*) is found only in western Marin County, almost entirely within Point Reyes National Seashore.

Mountain beavers have some unusual personal habits. They exhibit coprophagy, which is just a nice way of saying they eat their own shit to obtain maximum nutrients. When disturbed, they can secrete a thick ooze from their eyes which has been misinterpreted as tears. They are host to the world's largest flea, over one-third inch long. They will whine or sob in response to pain and emit a squeal or shrill whistle when agitated. Unable to sweat or pant, they can overheat when they venture out to forage, causing them to sprawl helplessly, utterly vulnerable to predators, until they cool off.

The Point Reyes Vision Fire in 1995 burned almost half the known range of the Point Reyes Mountain Beaver, including the majority of its prime habitat. National Park Service biologists estimate that only 20 of the 2,000 mountain beavers living in the burn area survived the fire, but another 3,000 are thought to live in Point Reyes outside the fire zone. It could take up to two decades for the population to recover.

Your odds of actually seeing a mountain beaver are slim, but if you're up for a snipe hunt, look in areas riddled with burrows and stacks of drying vegetation. Return at night to crawl scraped and bleeding through the scrub with a flashlight. Should you actually encounter one of these cantankerous animals, beware – pissed off mountain beavers gnash their teeth and may try to bite. Me, I don't need to see one - I just like knowing they are out there eating the poison oak and living their mysterious mountain beaver lives.

*West Marin Wild* is a sporadic column on the wildlife and natural world of West Marin. Please send wildlife sightings, interesting animal stories or encounters, topic suggestions, questions or corrections to **Box 111, Bolinas**.