

Nutty rodents

Squirrels dine on young but are nice to relatives

Being buried under a heavy snowfall without a square meal for eight months is enough to chill any romance.

Not so with Belding's ground squirrels, small gray-brown rodents measuring about 8 to 10 inches long. After their long hibernation, they dig through as much as 10 feet of snow to make their spring assignments in California's frigid Sierra Nevada mountains.

Fickle elements sometimes punish the overamorous. The first animals that left hibernation in 1977 were devastated by a series of unexpected snowstorms that lasted well into May. Unable to re-enter hibernation, many of them died.

"Although 1977 was a disaster, the last few years have been fairly good, and we hope this year will be no exception," said Paul W. Sherman, assistant professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley.

"The weather's important since the squirrels have a relatively short active season above ground lasting only about four months, from late April or early May."

SUPPORTED BY the National Geographic Society and the National Science Foundation, Sherman and his associates have marked, tagged and studied more than 3,000 of the ground squirrels in the Tioga Pass region of the Sierra Nevada in the last seven years.

Before the study not much was known about the ground squirrels of the Sierra Nevada. The Belding's squirrels made ideal subjects, because they appear above ground during the day,



Paul Sherman and Belding's ground squirrel. (National Geographic photo)

are big enough to be seen easily, and can be approached without difficulty by humans. Moreover, a road near the summit of Tioga Pass makes the region accessible in the spring.

The scientists found that the squirrels have a lot more to cope with than the weather. Vicious combat, infant-

cide, selfless heroism, and a strong sense of kinship are some of the forces that influence the rodents during their brief lifespan.

Males of the species have a particularly rough time of it in the spring. Only the largest, oldest, and strongest can secure a mate. When a prospective

suitor finds himself in the vicinity of a rival, he stands upright and chatters his teeth, a prelude to violent fighting that often results in mangled tails, damaged eyes, dislocated shoulders and even death.

Moreover, in their amatory pursuits, the males often range far from their burrows and are easily spotted on the still snowy landscape by sharp-eyed predators such as hawks.

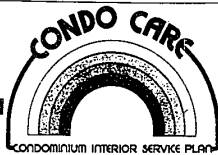
AFTER MATING, the females dig new burrows and prepare grass-lined nests in them. The males scatter to distant areas and tunnel their own individual bachelor quarters, leaving the care and upbringing of the young to the expectant mothers and their female relatives.

"One of the most interesting things about these animals," said Sherman, "is that they live in maternal, lineal kin groups, meaning the daughters stay with their mothers and sisters for their whole lives and the males disperse immediately after being weaned and never return home."

Establishing a closely knit territory that may consist of several neighboring burrows, a kin group forms a kind of mutual aid society to defend against those intent on killing their young.

Outside predators such as coyotes and hawks are of course major threats, but also menacing are attacks from yearling males and adult female squirrels outside a kin group who have lost their own young to predators.

Sherman speculates that it's the loss of their young that prompts females to move to a new location and attempt infanticide.



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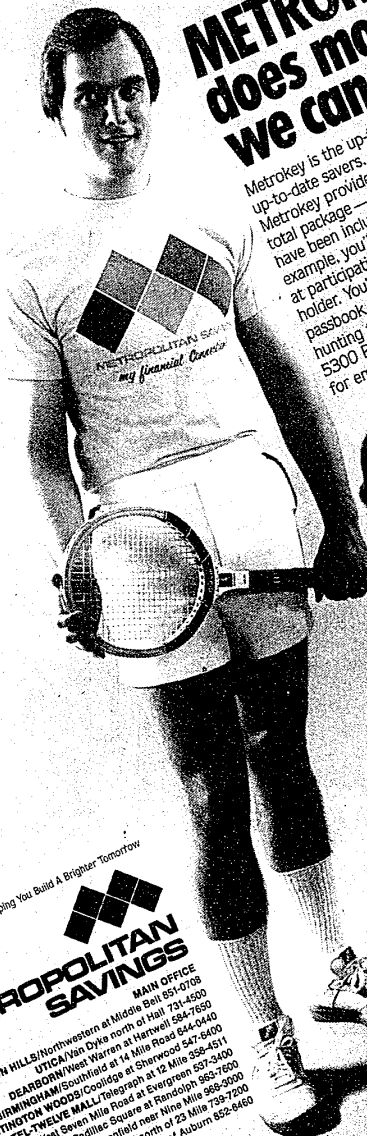
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