



WILDLIFE NOTES

Rock squirrel *Spermophilus variegatus*

Rock squirrels, as the name suggests, are not tree dwellers. Commonly seen in New Mexico, these squirrels have adapted to life on the ground and dig burrows and nests among rocks or hillsides.

There are exceptions to every generality, however. Rock squirrels have also been found in marsh grass, under cottonwood roots, inside a hay shed, under log fences and cabins, and beneath firewood stacks. They are found through the state, from low to high elevations, except in the far

eastern plains.

They are fairly large, with a body about 11 inches long and a bushy tail about eight inches long. They are gray or brownish, with a dappled coat. They are the largest ground squirrels in the state, and may be seen in a tree or bush, looking for food.

Apparently rock squirrels eat what's in season. They will eat cactus fruit, mesquite seeds, agave blooms, juniper berries, seeds from various plants, acorns, and fruit from orchards. They have been documented eating a banner-tailed kangaroo rat and a robin.

Little is known of their breeding habits.

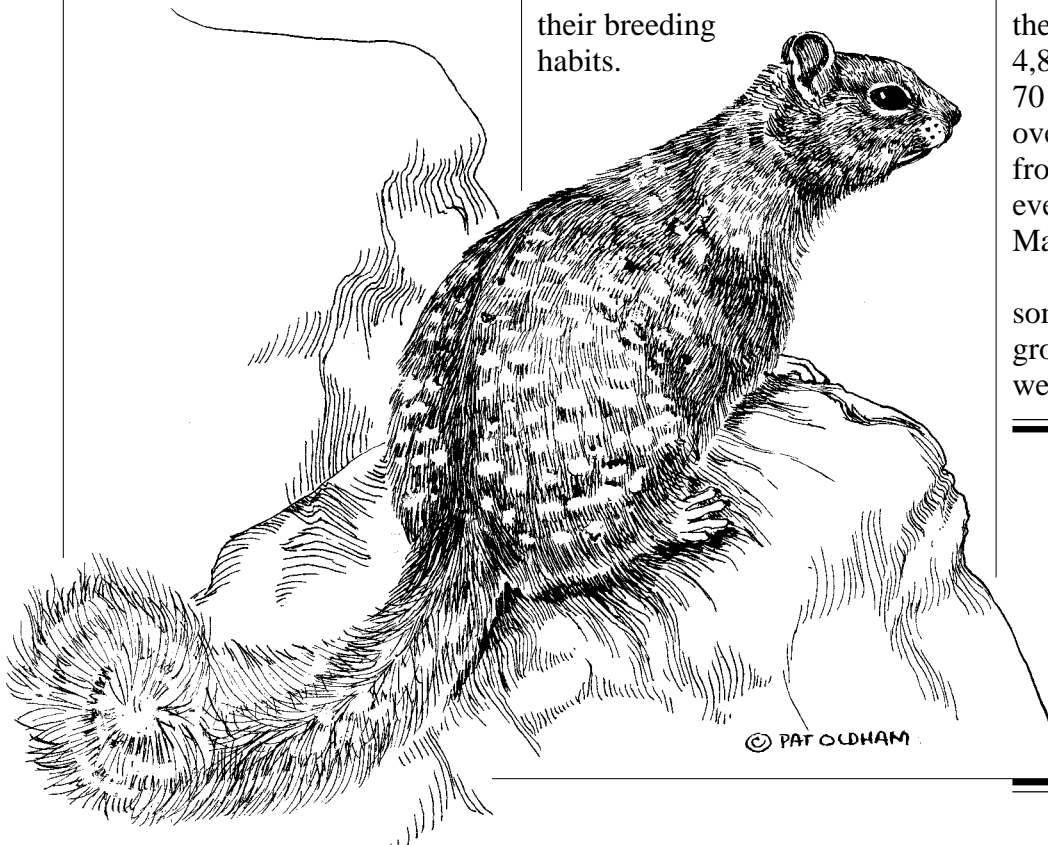
Rock squirrels appear to give birth from March to June, depending on the climate they inhabit. Six young were recorded at one site and may have one or two litters per year. Whether they are true hibernators is a matter of debate.

Rock squirrels are dormant for parts of the winter, but may be seen sunning themselves on a mild day. Certainly they are less active in the cold months.

The whistle of the rock squirrel is high-pitched, something like the call of a marmot.

One study of 16 marked rock squirrels concluded that their home ranges averaged 4,893 square yards (about 70 by 70 yards.) The squirrels molted over a five- to six-week period, from June 22 to Aug. 12. However, they may molt as early as May 20.

You may see these handsome animals near picnic grounds or ranch buildings, as well as in a remote canyon.



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