



WILDLIFE NOTES

Southern pocket-gopher

Thomomys umbrinus

Distinguishing Features

Southern pocket gophers are medium-size burrowing rodents with fur-lined cheek pouches. Kangaroo rats also have fur-lined cheek pouches, but are different than pocket gophers because they have longer tails. Pocket gophers have tails that are less than three-quarters the head and body length, and their skulls are more heavily built. Their forelegs are well-developed for digging.

Descriptive Details

The southern pocket gopher has a compact body, relatively large head, short legs, short nearly hairless tail, tiny ears, and long curved claws. This gopher is dark brown, with a purplish hue down the middle of the back. The southern pocket gopher is about 7.5 inches in length.

Distribution

This pocket gopher's habitat is from extreme southeastern Arizona and adjacent New Mexico southward to Veracruz, Mexico. In New Mexico, the southern pocket gopher is found only in the Animas Mountains in Hidalgo County, mostly above 7,000 feet, but as far down as 5,000 feet in some

canyon bottoms. Besides living in the higher parts of the mountains, the southern pocket gopher has been sighted at Indian, upper Deer, and lower Deer creeks. These and other areas in the Animas Mountains are key habitat areas for this gopher.

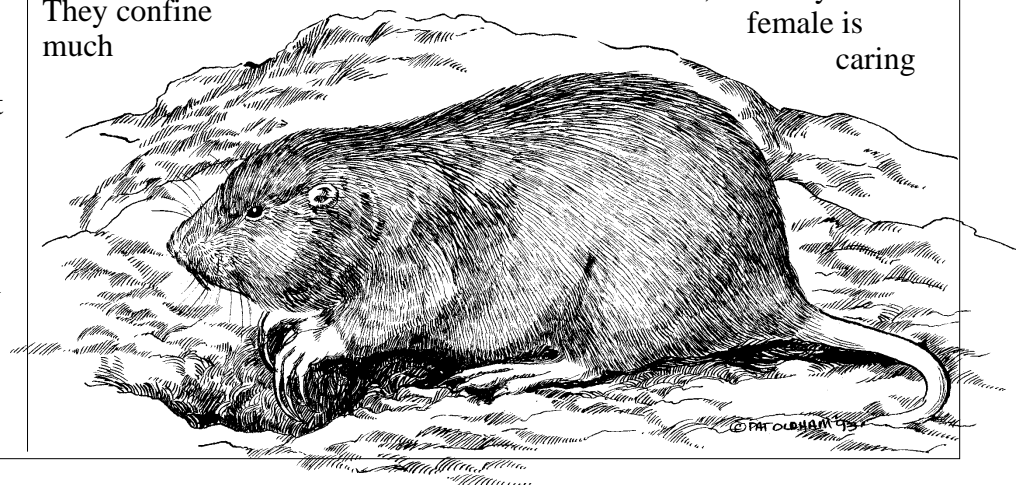
Biology

Southern pocket gophers are burrowing mammals, and they are rarely seen away from their burrows. Mounds of earth, deposited on the ground, are usually evidence of their presence. These fresh earth mounds are seen in late winter and early spring when the soil is relatively moist and crumbly. Late spring through early summer, as the soil dries and hardens, these mounds become less frequent.

Pocket gophers are active even when they are not pushing earth to the surface. They confine much

of their activity to existing burrow systems, or they may store soil from a new excavation in an old burrow. Pocket gophers are different from other New Mexico rodents in color and size. This is understandable, given the differences in texture, color, and other traits of the soils in which they burrow. Their color matches that of the earth in which they burrow, and there is a connection between their size and the depth and texture of the soil. Larger animals occur in deeper, softer soil, while smaller ones are in shallow, rocky soil. The pocket gopher's diet is strictly vegetative, with most of the food consisting of roots found while burrowing. Some food, transported in their cheek pouches, is stored in areas of the burrowed tunnel to be eaten later.

Pocket gophers are unsociable, and only when a female is caring



for young will they live together in a single tunnel. Pocket gophers have several mates, and breeding occurs two or more times during the year. Females usually become pregnant between mid-March and early April, giving birth to two or three young each time.

Status

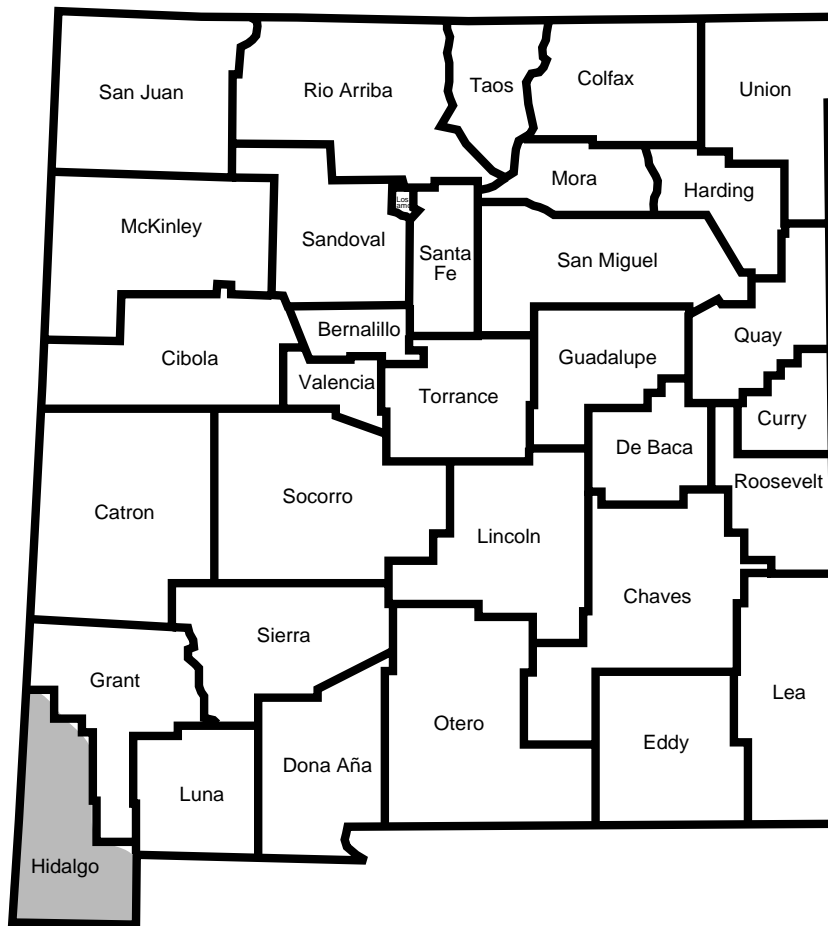
Southern pocket gophers are widespread and common, but the status of individual subspecies may not be known. The New Mexico subspecies (*T. u. emotus*) is relatively common in its restricted range.

Only because of its restriction and narrow distribution is the southern pocket gopher listed as endangered. There does not appear to be any immediate threat to the population, but habitat destruction or alteration, rodent control, and similar events could eventually affect this subspecies.

Conservation

Preservation of habitat and limits on taking are required to ensure the survival of this subspecies of pocket gopher.

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Shading indicates range of Southern pocket gopher.

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