

Haley Lake

Ref. No.:

565

ECOLOGICAL RESERVES COLLECTION
GOVERNMENT OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
VICTORIA, B.C.
VBV 1X4

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE
VANCOUVER ISLAND
MARMOT

BY
BETTY McKINNON

NOVEMBER 1976.

The Vancouver Island Marmot, *Marmota vancouverensis*, is included among the rare and endangered species of the Canada Wildlife Act. Nevertheless its protection is far from assured.

BACKGROUND

The Haley Lake area on Green Mountain appears to have the most vigorous colony. Apparently although MacMillan Bloedel Ltd. and Crown Zellerbach Ltd. logging companies have let some of the timbered slope out of their cutting plan, they are unwilling at this time to donate or sell the land encompassed in the proposed ecological reserve scheme. Crown Zellerbach has already agreed that the ridge area be a company reserve. The future of the lake area over which MacMillan Bloedel have jurisdiction is not at all assured.

Butler Peak is included in the proposed ecological reserve plan. Would the logging companies consider a smaller ecological reserve, excluding Butler Peak? Would such a reduced area encompass the whole colony's habitat?

Mr. Douglas Herde, a student of Dr. Ian McTaggart Cowan's, spent the summers of 1973 and 1974 studying the Haley Lake colony. Mr. Herde's thesis is not yet available but it will perhaps answer some of these questions. I understand Mr. Herde saw two marmots on Butler Peak. Is there migration between the Butler Peak and Haley Lake colony? If so a reduced reserve would perhaps be of little value.

"A Marmot Survey, Summer 1973" by William Darling and Maxwell Finkelstein, (two students working under Dr. Ian Smith) makes dismal reading. The areas searched were Mt. Washington, Mt. Albert Edward, Mt. Arrowsmith, Mr. Douglas, Mt. Moriarty, Mt. Heather, and Jordon Meadows. The only sighting was on Heather Mountain, one marmot and three active

burrows. (I believe however in 1974 there was a sighting on Mt. Washington.)

It would therefore seem that marmot colonies on Vancouver Island are sparse, and widely separated, perhaps justifying a more intensive search possibly with the use of helicopters. It is important that those engaged in such search be knowledgeable people sensitive to creating minimal disturbance.

SOME EXPEDITIONS SINCE 1974

July 21, 1974 -- Ralph Morton, Stan Baker and Walter Latter hiked to the Haley Lake area. They met and talked with Doug Herde who was doing research on the colony.

July 19, 1975 -- Ralph Morton, Ed Mankelow, Betty McKinnon and Walter Latter, drove to the Haley Lake area via Vaughn Road. Eight young and five adult marmots were seen.

September 18, 1975 -- Ralph Morton and Walter Latter hiked to Douglas Peak meadows. No evidence of marmots found.

August 14, 1976. Dick Guppy and Betty McKinnon went to Green Mountain ski lodge. Dick Guppy climbed over the ridge and found one old burrow.

September 12, 1976. -- Ralph Morton and Betty McKinnon went to Green Mountain ski lodge. Ralph found evidences of burrows. Men working on the road stated that they had heard whistles earlier in summer.

September 19. 1976 -- Ed Mankelow, Ralph Morton and Betty McKinnon drove to Haley Lake area and saw nine marmots.

OBSERVATIONS

July 19, 1975. -- The young seen were about the size of guinea pigs, dark chocolate brown with white noses. Four young were playing on a large flat boulder. They chased each

other and frequently touched noses.

The adults were rusty brown with ragged pelage, their rumps were darker brown, they appeared to be in moult.

One adult looked to be larger than the others, it appeared from over the top of the ridge.

Whistling was heard frequently from the animals, particularly when ravens passed overhead. A red tailed hawk elicited urgent sounding whistles when it soared over the colony.

A black bear was observed below the colony eating false hellebore which it was uprooting. It was more timid than the marmots and disappeared when Walt and Ralph descended the slope to take pictures. The marmots allowed themselves to be approached to within about twenty feet before diving into their burrows. Only the animals approached hid, the more distant ones remained in the open. The marmots reappeared a few minutes after the photographers rejoined us at our observation post--a flat area on the west side of the meadow just out of the timber where we were observing the animals with binoculars and a scope. Except for a passable picture of an adult taken by Walt the photos proved disappointing.

September 19. 1976. -- Ed Mankelow, Ralph Morton and Betty McKinnon again drove via Vaughn road to the Haley Lake colony. We noted a pick up truck parked at the top of the road when we stopped. As we approached the meadow through the timber, we heard shots apparently coming from the bowl. Ed ran ahead to confront the shooters, angry words were exchanged. Three men were perched on a rock just below the ridge and were eying the marmots through their rifle scopes! They claimed to be "glassing them". We thought at first they said "blasting" them. We saw no evidence of marmots having been shot, but it was disconcerting that they did not seem perturbed by the sound of close range gunfire. The

trio left in about half an hour and a little later we saw their pickup truck drive down the mountain.

Through our binoculars we counted nine marmots, three basking on rocks and the rest in the slide area. All the animals were ^ain deep chocolate brown colour with thick glossy pel~~l~~ages, their white noses being quite conspicuous. A pair of ptarmigans flew over and alit near us. A single bird followed them a few minutes later. The marmots whistled as the birds flew over the colony.

One marmot ran up to a rock upon which another marmot was basking. Three short squeaky chirps were heard. Both animals sat up and touched noses. The animal which had approached was about three quarters the size of the one on the rock. (A yearling?)

Another animal crossed the slide from the bottom to the top far side. It stopped in a patch of lupins and began feeding. We could not actually see the species of plant on which it was feeding.

Ralph Morton and I made our way across the slope to take pictures. We noted burrows at the bases of the large boulders. Many of the burrows were only a yard or so apart. Between two of the boulders we noted a number of scats, some fresh others old, as if one or more animals habitually used the area as a toilet. The fresh scats were soft brown, the old dried up ones seemed to contain fiber, (plant fibre or moulted hair?) The marmots allowed themselves to be approached to within about 20-30 feet before whistling loudly and ducking into their burrows. A few moments after we rejoined Ed for lunch on our vantage point on the west side of the meadow, the marmots we had attempted to photograph reappeared. Two of the photos are fairly good.

While we were eating our lunch we were startled by three very close shots, which appeared to have been fired from the timber on the west side of the ridge. We did not see the person or persons doing the shooting.

SUMMARY

The next three weekends were fine and quite warm, we were worried about the marmots as we do not know when they go into hibernation. Obviously we now know that they can be active as late as September 19th but we do not know how much later. We feel this is an important fact to establish as one can now drive to within a few hundred feet of the colony. If the marmots are active during the hunting season they are in real danger of being shot:

- (a) by unscrupulous individuals target practicing
- (b) by ignorant people who do not know what they are, and would like a specimen or two for a better look
- (c) by people who might consider them "varmints", being familiar with the alleged destructive tendencies of the eastern ground hogs.

We feel it imperative regardless of what protection is eventually afforded, that the Haley Lake basin and adjoining ridge be declared a non-shooting area. Such a ruling would need to be effectively enforced. Perhaps a gate could be put across the bottom of Vaughn road, or volunteers from the Fish and Game clubs or naturalist groups might take turns patrolling the area on the weekends that hunters have access to the Nanaimo River drainage area until the marmots go into hibernation. Such measures are of urgent necessity, Dr. McTaggart Cowan stated to me during a phone conversation that there may be as few as two breeding females in the Haley Lake colony.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL LINES OF ACTION

- (a) The production of a leaflet with an illustration of a marmot, and a text written by Dr. McTaggart Cowan describing their plight. As photos are expensive to duplicate perhaps the illustration could be done by Pat Wright or Sharkey Thomas. Such pamphlets to be distributed to the Fish and

Game clubs and at logging company gates leading to alpine areas.

(b) Eliciting the help of outdoor clubs in reporting any signs of marmots they may find when hiking in the mountains.

(c) Recruiting public support by means of articles in the press and perhaps a television interview with Dr. McTaggart Cowan.

(d) A summit conference of scientists and government officials to decide on courses of action.

(e) The consideration of repopulating former marmot habitats if a strong population can be ^{found} fostered in a particular area from which to take breeding stock.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

In "Canadian Endangered Species" by Darryl Stewart (Gage Publishing Co. Ltd., Toronto 1974) Dr. Ian McTaggart Cowan is quoted as saying the total known population of marmots does not exceed one hundred individuals. Darryl Stewart also states in this book that "this species is restricted solely to isolated, high, mountainous regions in the interior of Vancouver Island, where except for the Vancouver Island shrew Sorex vancouverensis and an obscure race of meadow mouse, it is the only species to have its entire population within the confines of Canada".

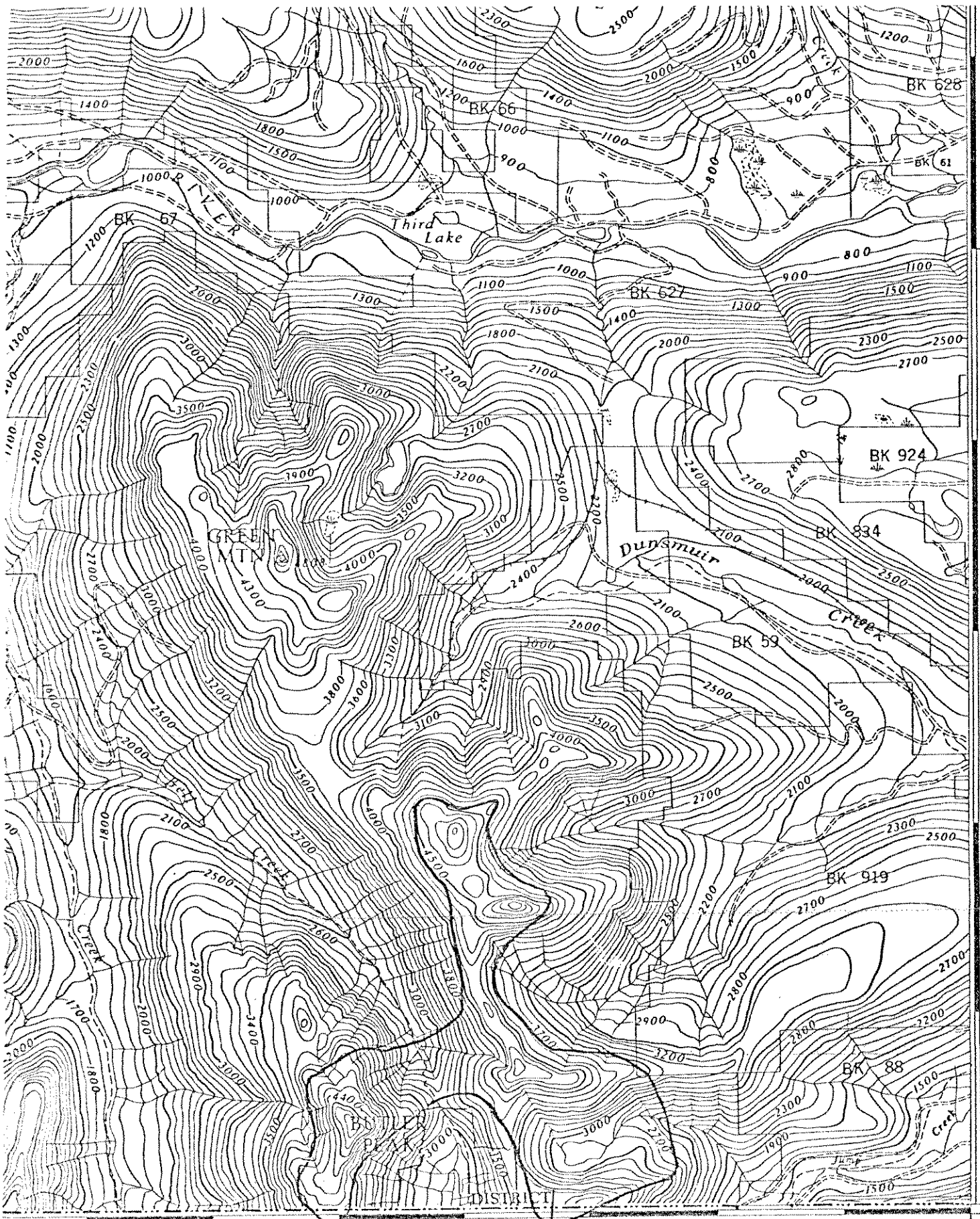
If we are aware of the plight of the whooping crane and other exotic endangered species, surely our own unique marmot should merit our utmost concern.

continued.....

Photo by Walt Latter.



Picture of an adult taken July 19, 1975. Reproduced from
a slide. 400 m.m. lens used.



IO LAKES

COLUMBIA

Scale: 1:150,000
 1 Mile approximately

MAGNETIC DECLINATION $23^{\circ}30'$ EAST
 AT CENTRE OF MAP, 1957
 Annual magnetic change $2.5'$ westerly

proposed ecological reserve

BK 15-2