

Cascade Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels and Hoary Marmots.

Dates: Mount Rainier: Myrtle Falls Hike: Saturday, July 9, 2022

Hoary Marmot

Mount St. Helens, Johnson Visitor Center: Monday, July 11, 2022

Cascades Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel

Mount Rainier: Skyline Trail Hike: Tuesday, July 12, 2022

Hoary Marmot & Cascade Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel

During the second week of July, my wife and I spent the week in the area of Mount Rainier and Mount St. Helens, in Washington, U.S.A. We experienced incredibly good weather with sunny skies most days and temperatures in the low 70's f. We accomplished a number of hikes, mainly in snow on Mount Rainier and in the xeric, flower festooned landscapes around the visitor center on Mount St. Helens. I had two squirrel target species in the area and I was thrilled at being successful in observing and photographing both species. The hoary marmot and the Cascade golden-mantled ground squirrel. On, Saturday, July 9, we drove up to Paradise, on the south side of Mount Rainier. Paradise is a very busy area with a visitor center, and some very popular hiking trails. Paradise is at an elevation of 5,400 feet, and all of the trails were laden in deep snow but it was very hard packed due to trampling by lots of people. We hiked out the Myrtle Falls Trail and crossed a small bridge, that was on a down slope that was super slippery with a combination of snow and ice. Once across the bridge, I scanned with my binoculars and spotted a hoary marmot. These marmots, when motionless, are very cryptic and look very similar to the many rocks that jut out in the barren patches, scattered about on the mountain slopes. This first marmot was outlined on the horizon, so he was quite easy to spot. I began my approach to get a better look and hopefully photograph the marmot. Well, he / she was very accommodating and just laid there. I got very close and the marmot could have cared less. I got lots of images and during my photo shoot, the marmot began to feed. He was on a snow free area about 100 feet by 50 feet, so the animal was able to feed in the vicinity of one of its burrows.



Hoary Marmot on the Myrtle Falls Trail, Mount Rainier.

On Monday, July 11, we drove up to the Johnson Ridge Visitor Center on Mount St. Helen's. We were there to learn about the volcano but I had a very pleasant surprise. I observed Cascade Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels at both the Loowit Overlook and then numerous squirrels at the Johnson Ridge Visitor Center. The squirrels were quite tame and obviously accustomed to people. I was able to get some very nice images and even though there was a sign posted to inform people not to feed the squirrels, it appears that people either do not read or they ignore the signs. These squirrels were very habituated by feeding. The squirrels in the brightly colored blue and red flowers made for a very nice habitat in which to photograph the animals.



Cascade Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel, Mount St. Helens, Johnson Ridge Visitor Center

On Tuesday, July 12, my wife and I once again returned to Paradise, on Mount Rainier. This time, we did a long hike on the Skyline Trail. Again, a tremendous amount of snow and a very long steep ascent up the trail. At about a mile out from the visitor center, I found a couple of marmots, one of which emerged from a snow field. The marmot burrow had about 2 feet of snow on top of it so the marmot had burrowed out through the snow. It was interesting to watch the marmot bask on a rock, but the animal would often return across the snow, to its burrow. I checked the surrounding area and could not find a burrow on the ground clear of snow, so this animal appeared to have dug its way out of the snow upon emerging from hibernation. At about 1.25 miles, there is a large rock outcrop, where most hikers stop for lunch or for snacks. There were at least 5, possibly as many as 6 or 7 Cascade golden-mantled ground squirrels.....running everywhere, checking out every person that stopped. I did see people feeding squirrels and I observed a number of squirrels enter open day packs that people had taken off and had placed them on the ground. So, even though the squirrels were habituated to being fed, which is never a good thing, it did make for a very nice photo opportunity.



Hoary Marmot, Skyline Trail, Paradise, Mount Rainier



Cascades Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel,
Skyline Trail, Paradise, Mount Rainier

On our return hike, I observed a yellow-pine chipmunk, about 6 feet up in a small fir tree. It was nice to observe a third squirrel species for the day.

Greg C Greer
Marietta, Georgia U.S.A.