

## Mountain Beaver

The mountain beaver, *Aplodontia rufa*, is a rodent found in the wild nowhere in the world but Washington, Oregon, California, and British Columbia. It is, in evolutionary terms, the oldest living rodent on earth. To have earned this accolade, it must be pretty successful at what it does.

Those whose gardens or landscapes have been visited by *Aplodontia rufa* can vouch for this fellow's appetite (the girl's, too) for a wide variety of desirable plants. Rhododendrons, roses, vegetables, trees, berry bushes, and ferns are just some of the plants that can disappear from a garden after a visit from a mountain beaver. (Which, by the way neither lives in the mountains nor is a beaver.) When large plants are cut down to nubs and disappear overnight, a mountain beaver is usually at fault. Often it leaves a trail of prunings and plant parts that can easily be followed to its burrow. Invariably, the site of the burrow will be a moist, bushy slope. If your landscape doesn't include such places, you are unlikely to make the acquaintance of a mountain beaver.

These animals can reach a weight of up to four pounds and are somewhat suggestive of a muskrat that has parted with its tail. Dark brown in color, mountain beavers have small eyes and ears. Their long front claws are used for digging and sometimes for defense. They normally come out only at night to feed and spend the rest of the time in their often extensive burrow systems. Their eyes don't work very well, but their very long whiskers are used as an adequate substitute. In any event, they don't seem to have any trouble finding the choicest plants in a garden. Mountain beavers are not a source of infectious disease that can be transmitted to humans or domestic animals. And, although the largest flea in the world, *Hystrichopsylla schefferi*, is found on mountain beavers it does not bother humans.

In most cases, there will be only one of these plant eaters inhabiting an area. However, if the slope is extensive enough and there is plenty of food available, either wild or in your garden, there might be a whole family nearby. In such a case, tunneling is likely to be extensive. Burrow openings are about six inches in diameter. They are sometimes stuffed with plant parts, apparently because the mountain beaver has been unable to get them all inside.

The Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife suggests a number of methods for discouraging mountain beavers from using your yard as a smorgasbord. A fence or other barrier can be quite effective. These animals travel on top of the ground from their burrows to your garden, and they have limited ability to jump. A wire fence constructed from 2" by 2" mesh or smaller and about two or more feet in height should keep them out of an area. Burying the lower part of the fence below ground or fastening it securely to the ground is essential. Railroad ties stacked two to three feet high might also deter them.

Or, fill all tunnel entrances with dirt, rocks, or wadded up paper. You can also secure newspaper into balls using twine, sprinkle them with predator urine and push them into the burrow. Then fill in the holes. Stand back while doing this and use a pole or prod. Mountain beavers can deliver a mean bite or scratch. In order for this method to work, you must be persistent. Harass the animal daily. It may take several weeks to get results.

Fumigants and repellants do not work very well.

Trapping is an option, although not a good one. A special permit is required for the use of any traps other than live traps, and live traps are not nearly as humane as people believe. It is illegal to trap a mountain beaver and release it anywhere other than the property where it was trapped without a permit. You may, however, euthanize the animal.

If you are seriously thinking of trapping and euthanizing a mountain beaver, please read the information at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/living/trapping.htm>. There is much more involved than you might think.

The best way to deal with mountain beavers, with some exceptions of course, is to co-exist. Minimize damage to your plants by using the control measures mentioned above, fencing and harassing them until they move their burrows. Once you've done that, you may never see the animal or evidence of it again.