

Whistler and Yap Yap

by Thornton W. Burgess

Johnny Chuck was the first one on hand the next morning. The fact is, Johnny was quite excited over the discovery that he had some near relatives. He always had supposed that the Woodchucks were a family by themselves. Now that he knew that he had some close relatives, he was filled with quite as much curiosity as ever Peter Rabbit possessed. Just as soon as Old Mother Nature was ready to begin, Johnny Chuck was ready with a question. "If you please," said he, "who are my nearest relatives?"

"The Marmots of the Far West," replied Old Mother Nature. "You know, you are a Marmot, and these cousins of yours out there are a great deal like you in a general way. The biggest and handsomest of all is Whistler, who lives in the mountains of the Northwest. The fact is, he is the biggest of all the Marmot family."

"Is he much bigger than Johnny Chuck?" asked Peter Rabbit.

"Considerably bigger," replied Old Mother Nature, nodding her head. "Considerably bigger. I should think he would weight twice as much as Johnny."

Johnny's eyes opened very wide. "My!" he exclaimed, "I should like to see him. Does he look like me?"

"In his shape he does," said Old Mother Nature, "but he has a very much handsomer coat. His coat is a mixture of dark brown and white hairs which give him a grayish color. The upper part of his head, his feet and nails are black, and so are his ears. A black band runs from behind each ear down to his neck. His chin is pure white and there is white on his nose. Underneath he is a light, rusty color. His fur is thicker and softer than yours, Johnny; this is because he lives where it is colder. His tail is larger, somewhat bushier, and is a blackish-brown."

"If you please, why is he called Whistler?" asked Johnny Chuck eagerly.

"Because he has a sharp, clear whistle which can be heard a very long distance," replied Old Mother Nature. "He sits up just as you do. If he sees danger approaching he whistles, as a warning to all his relatives within hearing."

"I suppose it is foolish to ask if he lives in a hole in the ground as Johnny Chuck does," spoke up Peter Rabbit.

"He does," replied Old Mother Nature. "All Marmots live in holes in the ground, but Whistler lives in entirely different country. He lives up on the sides of the mountains, often so high that no trees grow there and the ground is rocky. He digs his hole down in between the rocks."

"It must be a nice, safe hole," said Peter. "I guess he doesn't have to worry about being dug out by Reddy fox."

"You guessed quite right," laughed Old Mother Nature. "Nevertheless, he has reason to fear being dug out. You see, out where he lives, Grizzly, the big cousin of Buster Bear, also lives, and

Grizzly is very fond of a Marmot dinner when he can get one. He is so big and strong and has such great claws that he can pull the rocks apart and dig Whistler out. By the way, I forgot to tell you that Whistler is also called the Gray Marmot and the Hoary Marmot. He lives on grass and other green things and, like Johnny Chuck, gets very fat in the fall and then sleeps all winter. There are one or two other Marmots in the Far West who live farther south than does Whistler, but their habits are much the same as those of Whistler and Johnny Chuck. None of them are social. I mean by that you never find two Marmot homes very close together. In this they differ from Johnny's smaller cousin, Yap Yap the Prairie Dog. Yap Yap wouldn't be happy if he didn't have close neighbors of his own kind. He has one of the most social natures of all my little people."

"Tell us about him," begged Happy Jack Squirrel before Johnny Chuck, who is naturally slow, could ask for the same thing.

"Yap Yap is the smallest of the Marmot family," said Old Mother Nature. "In a way he is about as closely related to the Ground Squirrels as he is to the Marmots. Johnny Chuck has only four claws on each front foot, but Yap Yap has five, just as the Ground Squirrels have. He looks very much like a small Chuck dressed in light yellow-brown. His tail for the most part is the same color as his coat, but the end is black, though there is one member of the family whose tail has a white tip. In each cheek is a small pouch, that is, a small pocket, and this is one of the things that shows how closely related to the Spermophiles he is.

"As I said before, Yap Yap is very social by nature. He lives on the great open plains of the West and Southwest, frequently where it is very dry and rain seldom falls. When you find his home you are sure to find the homes of many more Prairie Dogs very close at hand. Sometimes there are hundreds and hundreds of homes, making a regular town. This is because the Prairie Dogs dearly love the company of their own kind."

"Does Yap Yap dig the same kind of a hole that I do?" asked Johnny Chuck.

"In a way it is like yours," replied Old Mother Nature, "but at the same time it is different. In the first place, it goes almost straight down for a long distance. In the second place there is no mound of sand in front of Yap Yap's doorway. Instead of that the doorway is right in the very middle of the mound of sand. One reason for this is that when it does rain out where Yap Yap lives it rains very hard indeed, so that the water stands on the ground for a short time. The ground being flat, a lot of water would run down into Yap Yap's home and make him most uncomfortable if he did not do something to keep it out. So he brings the sand out and piles it all the way around his doorway and presses it down with his nose. In that way he builds up a firm mound which he uses for two purposes; one is to keep the water from running down the hole, and the other is as a sort of watch tower. He sits on the top of his mound to watch for his enemies. His cousins with the white tail digs a hole more like yours.

"Yap Yap loves to visit his neighbors and to have them visit him. They are lively little people and do a great deal of talking among themselves. The instant one of them sees an enemy he gives a signal. Then every Prairie Dog scampers for his own hole and dives in head first. Almost at once he pops his head out again to see what the danger may be."

"How can he do that without going clear to the bottom to turn around?" demanded Peter.

"I wondered if any of you would think of that question," chuckled Old Mother Nature. "Just a little way down from the entrance Yap Yap digs a little room at one side of his tunnel. All he has to do

is to scramble into that, turn around and then pop his head out. As I said before, his tunnel goes down very deep; then it turns and goes almost equally far underground. Down there he has a nice little bedroom. Sometimes he has more than one.”

“If it is so dry out where he lives, how does he get water to drink?” asked Happy Jack.

“He doesn't have to drink,” replied Old Mother Nature. “Some folks think that he digs down until he finds water way down underneath, but this isn't so. He doesn't have to have water. He gets all the moisture he needs from the green things he eats.”

“I suppose, like the rest of us, he has lots of enemies?” said Peter.

Old Mother Nature nodded. “Of course,” said she. “Old Man Coyote and Reddy Fox are very fond of Prairie Dog. So are members of the Hawk family. Then in some places there is a cousin of Shadow the Weasel called the Black-footed Ferret. He is to be feared most of all because he can follow Yap Yap down into his hole. There is a cousin of Hooty the Owl called the Burrowing Owl because it builds its home in a hole in the ground. You are likely to find many Burrowing Owls living in Prairie Dog villages. Also you are apt to find Buzztail the Rattlesnake there.

“A lot of people believe that Yap Yap, Buzztail and the little Burrowing Owl are the best of friends and often live together in the same hole. This isn't so at all. Buzztail is very fond of young Prairie Dog and so is the Burrowing Owl. Rather than dig a hole for himself the Owl will sometimes take possession of one of Yap Yap's deserted holes. If he should make a mistake and enter a hole in which Yap Yap was at home, the chances are that Yap Yap would kill the Owl for he knows that the Owl is an enemy. Buzztail the Rattlesnake also makes use of Prairie Dog holes, but it is safe to say that if there are any Prairie Dog babies down there they never live to see what the outside world is like. So Buzztail and the Burrowing Owl are really enemies instead of friends of Yap Yap, the Prairie Dog.”

“Why is he called a Dog?” asked Peter.

Old Mother Nature laughed right out. “Goodness knows,” said she. “He doesn't look like a Dog and he doesn't act like a Dog, so why people should call him a Dog I don't know, unless it is because of his habit of barking, and even his bark isn't at all like a Dog's—not nearly so much so as the bark of Reddy Fox. Now I guess this will do for to-day. Haven't you little folks had enough of school?”

“No,” cried Peter Rabbit and Jumper the Hare and Happy Jack and Chatterer the Red Squirrel and Striped Chipmunk and Johnny Chuck. “We want to know about the rest of the members of the order of Rodents or Gnawers,” added Peter. “Of course in a way they are sort of related to us and we want to know about them.”

Old Mother Nature laughed good-naturedly. “All right,” said she, “come again to-morrow morning and we'll see what more we can learn.”

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