

The Fauna of Rithet's Bog: Townsend's Vole

The Townsend's Vole is a medium sized rodent with a plump and rounded body shape and dense, dark brown fur. The snout and face are short and the ears are fairly large, but not prominent. With a body length of 120 to 160 mm (4.7 to 6.3 in) it is one of the largest North American voles. The tail is relatively short, about half the body length. The scientific name is *Microtus townsendii* and this species is closely related to other voles, lemmings and muskrats. We often think of muskrats as being small beavers, but they are actually large voles.

Townsend's Voles occupy a narrow strip along the west coast of North America, ranging from Vancouver Island and southwest corner of mainland British Columbia south through Washington and Oregon into northern California. They inhabit grasslands, wet meadows and the edges of marshes. At Rithet's Bog they are usually seen on the edge of the trail beside the West Wetland adjacent to Chatterton Way and also beside the Wet Meadow on the south side of the park below the Foxborough townhouses. They are fairly docile and can sometimes be viewed for several minutes if not approached too closely. Like many rodents, Townsend's Voles undergo large swings in population density. At Rithet's Bog they have been fairly numerous over the last few years.

Townsend's Voles feed on soft green vegetation such as grasses, rushes and sedges. High population densities can have a significant impact on native vegetation. They are also an important prey species for owls, hawks, mink and racoons, so they are an integral component of the ecology at Rithet's Bog. The feral cat population at Rithet's Bog probably has a significant impact on our Townsend's Vole populations. While we hear a lot about the impact of feral cat predation on birds, only around thirty percent of cat predation is on birds. The other seventy percent is on terrestrial vertebrates such as rodents. Cat predation on voles not only affects the vole populations, it also impacts native predator populations by reducing their food supply.

In some of the areas at Rithet's Bog that harbour Townsend's Voles, the vegetation is dominated by Reed Canary Grass, an invasive species that we are trying to eradicate. In areas like this, Reed Canary Grass will have to be removed gradually and replaced by native species such as Tall Mannagrass to maintain the habitat of our native species such as the voles. Invasive species removal is not ecological restoration, it is just one component of a larger process that should be carefully planned.

