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***Phodopus sungorus* (Dzungarian hamster)**

By Jennifer Mattke

Classification

Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Rodentia
Suborder: Sciurognathi
Family: Muridae
Subfamily: Cricetinae
Genus: *Phodopus*
Species: *Phodopus sungorus*

Geographic Range

The dwarf or Dzungarian hamster is found throughout Mongolia, Russia, and adjacent parts of Siberia and Manchuria.

Habitat

The Dzungarian hamster inhabits semi-arid areas. It usually prefers grassy plains, sand dunes, or wormwood steppes. (Nowak 1991)

Physical Description

Coloration of Dzungarian hamsters ranges from gray to pinkish buff dorsally and whitish on the underparts (Nowak, 1991). Some individuals have a dark dorsal stripe. The ears are dark blackish, edged and lined with white. During the winter months the fur turns partly white. As a result of having been bred and sold as domestic pets, these hamsters have given rise to a number of mutations in coat color. Three color mutations are commonly recognized: albino, argente, and opal; and two pattern mutations, mottled and platinum.

The Dzungarian hamster has a rounded robust body and short broad feet, covered with thick fur throughout. They also have dark eyes, long whiskers, sharp claws, and cheek pouches. Head and body length is 7-10.5cm while the tail length is 0.6-1.8cm. As in all rodents, one upper and one lower incisor are found on each side of the jaw. Canines and

premolars are always absent, and there are no more than three lophodont cheek teeth on either side. (Macdonald 1984, Hill 1997)

Reproduction

The Dzungarian hamster breeds from February to November. It is known to breed only once or occasionally twice a year in the wild, but it can breed more than that in captivity. In the wild, males and females meet only to copulate, then separate permanently. The gestation period is typically 20-22 days, but can be as short as 18-19 days. Litter size is usually between 5 and 12. The young are born blind and hairless, weighing approximately 1.4 grams. They are cared for by the mother alone, and they are weaned after a month or so. The young become sexually mature soon after weaning, or at a couple of months age, which helps to give this species an impressive capacity for reproduction. (Macdonald 1984, Nowak 1991, Parker 1990)

Behavior

Dzungarian hamsters are solitary animals, meeting only for breeding purposes. Nests are built in underground burrows using grass, wool, feathers, or other soft findings. Hamsters seem to be most active in the evening and early morning, but also sometimes throughout the night. While foraging, *Phodopus sungorus* fills its cheek pouches with small seeds and carries larger items like potatoes back to the burrow in its mouth. Food is either stored in the burrow for the winter, eaten on returning to the burrow, or eaten above ground in the shelter of an undisturbed spot. This pattern is very useful when food is abundant irregularly, as during winter months.

The Dzungarian hamster enters a shallow torpor during the winter months in its burrow, only waking on warmer days to eat food from its stores.

P. sungorus has acute senses of smell and hearing. It communicates with high frequency sounds as well as with squeaks audible to the human ear. This communication seems to be most important during mating times.

These animals are easy to tame and make nice pets for children. (Macdonald 1984, Nowak 1991)

Food Habits

The Dzungarian hamster is mainly herbivorous and granivorous. Normally it eats seeds and any available plant material. As the dwarf hamster forages, it pushes food into the huge cheek pouches, which enable it to carry large quantities of food to its underground quarters. (Macdonald 1984)

Economic Importance for Humans: Negative

Dzungarian hamsters are considered serious pests to agriculture in some areas.
(Macdonald 1984)

Economic Importance for Humans: Positive

Dzungarian hamsters make good pets (Parker 1990).

Conservation Status

Other Comments

Phodopus sungorus is a member of the subfamily Cricetidae, family Muridae.

References

Hill, Lorraine. 1997. <http://www.hamsters.co.uk/camp.htm>

Macdonald, D., ed. 1984. Encyclopedia of Mammals. Facts on File Publications, New York.

Nowak, R.M. 1991. Walker's Mammals of the World. Fifth Edition. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

Parker, S.P., ed. 1990. Grzimek's Encyclopedia of Mammals, vol 2. McGraw-Hill Publishing Company. New York.

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