

Marmots are returned to the Dolomites

June 5 2006

Twenty pairs of marmots -- Europe's version of the U.S.'s groundhog -- have been reintroduced into Italy's National Park of the Belluno Dolomites.

"The Alpine marmot is at risk of extinction in most mountain areas and we hope this pilot scheme will spur others," the director of the wildlife preserve, Nino Martino, told the Italian news agency ANSA. "We hope to bring another 40 pairs next year."

The marmots -- also known as woodchucks in the United States -- feed on specific kinds of vegetation that have been threatening to overrun the park, Martino said.

The marmots are also expected to help maintain the park's population of golden eagles, whose numbers are dwindling.

"We have eight pairs of golden eagles," Martino told ANSA. "At the moment all they have to feed on are hares, small buck and deer, certain kinds of woodfowl and snakes. The marmot will make sure their future is not jeopardized."

Italian officials are trying to return various animals to the wild or keep them from disappearing. The osprey has been reintroduced into the Maremma National Park north of Rome, while bear populations in Abruzzo have been boosted, ANSA reported.

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