

Wanted: Varmint

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The raggedy-looking tabby jogged across the road from the newspaper office, and the taxi driver and I watched it simultaneously as it went happily by, a large dead rat hanging from its jaws.

Now, normally that would have provided a chance to joke about how even rats escaping the proverbial ship don't always get away in the end, but instead the phrase "varmint hunter" came to mind, two words that had only appeared in my conscious the week before.

Tvoi Den newspaper dropped the word "varminthunting" or варминтхантин into a story about a suspected murderer, for he was a top varmint hunting champion. The paper, which doesn't normally go in for too much explicatory detail, then explained how varmint hunting had its origins in the Great Depression in the United States when farmers were forced to watch over their meager crops, shooting any rodent that came near them.

The rodents themselves are pretty small, but once you get within a hundred meters or so, they quite naturally — seeing you have a gun on your shoulder and they are chewing on your corn — make haste, which meant that varmint hunters are known for shooting from very far away

and hitting very small targets.

This varmint hunter did it simpler, so it is alleged. Having had an argument in a bar, he left, got his gun and killed the guy. Not from 1,000 meters but close up — but his hunting preference made the paper blow up the story.

The national varmint hunting association does not have any information on their erstwhile colleague on its web site — www.nfbv.ru — that works not only for local varmint hunters but for benchrest hunters, gun shooters who like to shoot things very far away while sitting down. One chair for sale on the site costs 40,000 rubles (\$1,300) and it doesn't even have a drinks' rest.

The top of the site features a hunter with a rifle in his hand looking toward a suslik, or ground squirrel, although it might possibly be a surok, or marmot.

To the untrained eye it looks like Punxsutawney Phil has come out to taunt Bill Murray.

The site is steeped in the obsessiveness of those who love the more obscure pleasures. Somebody writes about which telescopic sight is best with a mouse at hundreds of meters, the choice of bullets for shooting a buck-toothed animal eating your crops and notes that he could write and write on the subject. But, he reconsiders.

“At the end of the day, the rodent doesn't care.”

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