



Woodchucks

(*Marmota monax*)



The woodchuck (*Marmota monax*), also known as the groundhog, whistle pig, or marmot, is one of the most widely distributed animals in the Northeast. Many people regard the woodchuck as a nuisance because they can damage lawns and gardens, however they can also be beneficial. Their burrows help aerate the soil and provide denning sites and refuge for many other animals, such as rabbits and foxes. Prior to the European settlement of North America, the woodchuck was far less common than it is today. The conversion of forests into agricultural land created an abundance of suitable habitat. Today, suburban areas with lawns, gardens, hedgerows, and sheds elevated on concrete blocks offer plenty of suitable habitat for woodchucks.



Description



The woodchuck is a large, heavy-bodied rodent ranging in weight from 5 to 10 pounds. It is the largest member of the squirrel family. The head and body range from 16 to 20 inches in length. The tail length is usually between 4 to 7 inches.

Male and female woodchucks are similar in appearance, but males tend to be somewhat larger. The color of their body is a grizzled brownish gray, and their underside is a light buff or light yellow. The top of the head, legs and tail are dark brown, while the sides of the face, nose, chin, and lips are buffy white.

The woodchucks' forefeet have long, curved claws that are adapted for digging. Along with being an excellent digger, the woodchuck is also a capable climber and swimmer. They can easily climb trees and some kinds of fences.

Life History

Range and Habitat: The woodchuck inhabits a large portion of the eastern United States. They can be found from Wisconsin down to northern Mississippi, and from North Carolina up to Maine. Their range also extends north across southern Canada and into central Alaska. Woodchucks thrive in agricultural areas, and commonly occur in open woodlands, fields, suburbs, and urban parks.

Woodchucks are generally solitary animals. Usually only one adult occupies a burrow, but for a short time during the mating period, a male and a female may occupy the same burrow. However, they have been known to share burrows with other animals, such as skunks and raccoons.

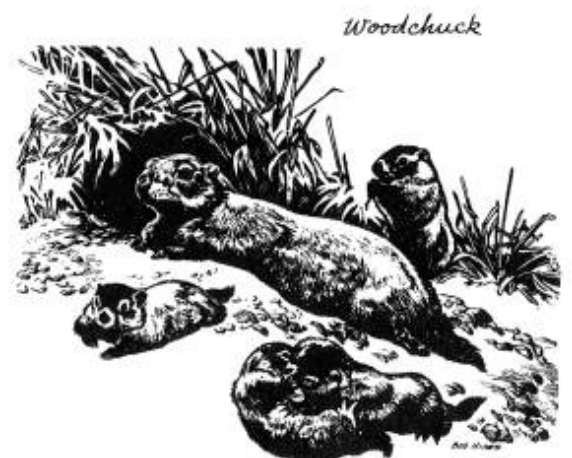
The burrow is a set of tunnels and chambers that the woodchuck excavates underground. Burrows are often located in embankments, field edges or under sheds, barns, or other buildings. Woodchucks will often have different burrows for summer and winter use. The summer burrow is generally larger and in an open area, whereas the winter burrow is usually in wooded or brushy areas. Unoccupied woodchuck burrows are frequently used by other animals. Foxes often use woodchuck burrows as den sites for giving birth and raising their pups.



Woodchucks are also one of the few animals that enter into true hibernation. Their heart rate and body temperature decrease dramatically during their 3 to 4 month hibernation period. Like other hibernating animals, the woodchuck gains weight in the summer and loses weight in the winter. The weight gain in the summer is due to the fat supply it builds up to sustain it through hibernation. In New England, woodchucks hibernate between October and April.

Food Habits: Woodchucks are herbivores and their diet consists of vegetation such as grasses, dandelions, clover, alfalfa, and agricultural crops, such as strawberries, beans, peas and other vegetables when available. They have also been known to eat insects and snails.

Reproduction: In our area, woodchuck offspring are born May, after a gestation period of approximately 31 days. They are born blind and hairless, weighing about 26 to 27 grams. Each litter consists of approximately 2 to 6 young, and females only mate once a year. The mother stays in the burrow with the young for about one week when she gives birth and the young stay within the burrow until they are about four to five weeks old. When they are three to four weeks old the mother will bring green plants into the burrow for them to feed on. By late June or early July the young disperse from the den and become independent. The average life expectancy of a woodchuck in the wild is about 5 to 6 years although most do not live that long. Woodchucks have numerous predators including; coyotes, foxes, dogs, fishers, bobcats, and hawks.



Disease: Even though woodchucks pose little threat to humans, one should always take precautions when dealing with wild animals. Woodchucks can carry parasites such as ticks and fleas, and have been known to host diseases such as tularemia and sylvatic plague though the chance of contracting a disease from a woodchuck is low. Woodchucks are known to be a host of the rabies virus, and in any given year the R.I. Department of Health will confirm one or more positive cases in woodchucks in state. Any contact between a domestic animal such as a dog or cat and a woodchuck should be reported to your veterinarian and animal control officer immediately.

Damage Identification

Damage to crops and gardens can be extensive, as a woodchuck or two can destroy an entire garden in a short

amount of time. Rows of newly sprouted peas or beans, neatly clipped with only an inch of stem remaining, is often a sign that there are woodchucks in your garden. Also, the woodchuck may gnaw the bark of fruit trees or ornamental shrubs to wear down their incisor teeth, which grow long during their winter hibernation. The mounds of dirt from the excavated burrows and holes at the entrance of the burrow can cause damage to farm equipment, and pose a hazard to horses and riders.



Photo Courtesy of L. Lehman

In Rhode Island, state law (RIGL 20-16-2) allows a property owner to kill, by legal means, any furbearer (as defined in RIGL 20-16-1) that is killing or attempting to kill any livestock or domestic animals, destroying crops, creating a health hazard, or causing economic damage to their property. However, the law does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the DEM within 24 hours.

The DEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers. Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured. Moving wildlife can spread disease to animals in areas where the nuisance individuals are moved. By moving wildlife, you will only cause harm to the animals, and possibly cause problems for other people who live in the relocation area. Also note that poisons are illegal for use against woodchucks, or any other animals, and smoking animals from their dens is also illegal.

RIDEM does not remove nuisance wildlife. For contact information of a nuisance wildlife control specialist (NWCS) please visit www.wildlifehelp.org or email the Division of Fish & Wildlife at DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov.

Control Methods

In many instances, the offending animal is dispatched by the property owner with the use of a firearm. This may not be safe or legal in all situations. For specific laws and regulations regarding the use of firearms consult the Department of Environmental Management, Division of Enforcement at (401) 222-3070 or the Division of Fish and Wildlife at DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov or 401-789-0281, and your local Police Department.

Woodchucks can be easily trapped in cage or box-type traps, using apples as bait. Traps should be set as close as possible to burrows or travel ways and should be checked at least twice a day. Be especially careful on hot summer days as the animal will quickly over heat in the trap. The woodchuck is considered a “target” animal for rabies (*i.e.* having a high risk for contracting the disease), and state regulations prohibit the relocation of captured animals. Captured animals may only be released at the site of capture or euthanized in a humane manner. The use of foothold traps, snares, and poisons are prohibited in Rhode Island. Before setting a trap have a game plan. The DEM will not remove animals from traps. Contact a NWCS to assist with woodchucks or other wildlife problems.

Fencing of small gardens may prove to be an effective means of preventing damage, although woodchucks are excellent climbers so it may not work every time. Fencing will prevent other animals, such as rabbits, dogs and cats from getting into the garden. The fencing must be rigid, no less than 3 feet high, and buried to a depth of no less than 10 to 12 inches. The size of some gardens or agricultural plots may make this option impractical. Due to their ability to climb, fencing may also not be effective in all cases. Electrifying the fence will make it much more effective. Fencing placed around the bottom of sheds will also prevent woodchucks and other animals from gaining access to dig burrows.

The use of scarecrows and other deterrence devices may prove temporarily effective. These should be moved regularly for best results. The use of ammonia-soaked rags in or at the entrance to woodchuck burrows may be irritating enough to encourage the animal to abandon the burrow. The rags must be changed regularly to be most effective.

Planting certain types of flowers, such as marigolds, around or within the garden may discourage woodchucks. Try to avoid planting crops that are attractive to woodchucks. There are a few garden crops that woodchucks will completely avoid. Peas, beans, broccoli, cabbage, lettuce, and carrots are particularly sought after. Young plants are more susceptible to woodchuck damage than older plants. The use of row covers may provide some protection until these plants have had time to develop. For more information on any of these topics, contact the Department of Environmental Management, Division of Enforcement: (401) 222-3070, Division of Fish and Wildlife: (401) 789-0281, Division of Agriculture: (401) 222-2781, or the URI cooperative extension: (401) 874-2900.

Selected References

Chapman, J.A., and G. Feldhammer. 1982. *Wild Mammals of North America, Biology, Management, Economics*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

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Whitaker Jr, J.O. and W. Hamilton Jr. 1998. *Mammals of the Eastern United States*. Cornell University.

Diagrams courtesy of <http://www.nenature.com>

Woodchuck photographs courtesy of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

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