Woodchucks in Rhode Island

The woodchuck, *Marmota monax*, also known as the groundhog, whistle pig, or marmot is one of the most widely distributed animals in the Northeast. It is the largest member of the squirrel family. Many people regard the woodchuck as a nuisance, which is understandable, however they are beneficial in some respects. 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 today. The settlers created more suitable habitat by converting forests into farmland, and as a result the woodchuck population grew tremendously.

Description:

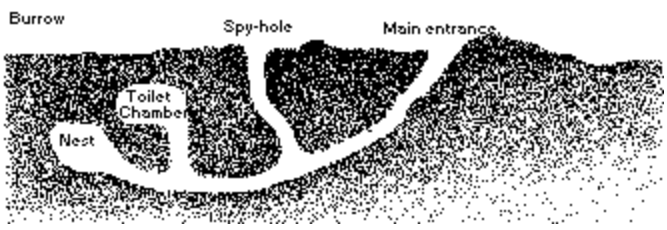
The woodchuck is a large, heavy bodied rodent ranging in weight from 5 to 10 pounds. The head and body range from 16 to 20 inches length. The tail length is usually between 4 to 7 inches.

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. 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. Their tracks are very similar to that of a raccoon, except the raccoon has five digits on each foot, whereas the woodchuck has four on the forefeet and five on the hind feet.

Life History:

The woodchuck is most active early in the morning and late in the afternoon. It thrives in agricultural areas, and commonly occurs in open woodlands, suburbs, urban parks, cemeteries, along highways and areas under powerlines. Woodchucks are herbivores; 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 poultry, insects, and snails.



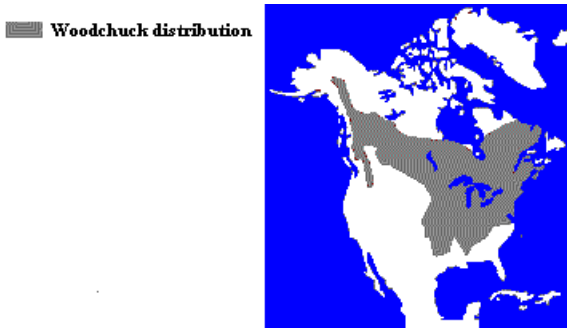
The woodchuck excavates in a set of tunnels and chambers, known as a burrow. Burrows are often located in embankments, field edges or under sheds, barns, or other buildings. Woodchucks will often have different burrows for

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.

Woodchucks are 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 its' hibernation.

The woodchuck is more or less a solitary animal. 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 offspring of the woodchuck are born in April or early May, after a gestation period of approximately 31 days. They are born blind and hairless, weighing about 26-27 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 one month old. The average life expectancy of a woodchuck in the wild is about 5 to 6 years. The woodchuck has numerous predators, the more common ones are coyotes, foxes, dogs, fishers, and hawks.



The woodchuck inhabits a large portion of the United States. They occur in the eastern US from Wisconsin and Maine south to northeastern Mississippi, central Alabama, northern Georgia and northern North Carolina, and west of the Mississippi from eastern North Dakota to eastern Oklahoma. Their range also extends north across southern Canada and into east-central Alaska.

Damage Identification:

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. Damage to crops and gardens can be extensive. A woodchuck or two can literally destroy an entire 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.

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 222-3070 or the Division of Fish and Wildlife weekdays from 8:30 to 4:00 at 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), therefor, 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.

Fencing of small gardens may prove an effective means of preventing damage. Fencing will also prevent other animal such as rabbits, dogs and cats from getting into the garden. The fencing must be rigid, no less than three 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. Also due to their ability to climb, fencing may not be effective in all cases. Electrifying the fence will make it much more effective. Fencing placed around the bottom of sheds will prevent woodchucks and other animals access.

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, which apparently are distasteful, around or within the garden may discourage woodchucks. There are few garden crops that woodchucks will completely avoid, some such as peas, beans, broccoli, carrots are more sought after than others. Try to avoid planting those crops that experience has shown are attractive to woodchucks. 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; 222-3070, Division of Fish and Wildlife; 789-0281, Division of Agriculture; 222-2781, or the URI cooperative extension; 874-2900.

Disease Carriers:

The threat of contracting a disease from a woodchuck is very low. It has been documented that the woodchuck can carry several diseases, such as tularemia and sylvatic plague. Rodents are almost never found to be infected with the rabies virus. Woodchucks however are somewhat susceptible to the virus, and several have tested positive for the disease in Rhode Island. The most common way of human contraction of rabies is through pets or domesticated animals such as cats and dogs. Even though woodchucks pose little threat to humans one should always take precautions when dealing with wild animals.

References:

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

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

U.S. Department of Agriculture. Animal Damage Control. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

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