



Woodchucks



Woodchucks, also known as groundhogs, are the largest members of the squirrel family (Family Sciuridae) in New York State. Their closest relatives include squirrels, chipmunks and prairie dogs.



Description

Woodchucks have chunky bodies, blunt faces, and short legs. They are dark brown (rarely black) with a grayish or grizzled appearance. Immature woodchucks may be slightly paler than adults. An average adult woodchuck in New York State weighs five to ten pounds. Woodchuck tracks resemble handprints but are smaller than a raccoon's. They also show claw marks whereas a raccoon's handprint does not.

Life History

Woodchucks usually begin breeding activity during late February or March. Males emerge from hibernation first and travel from burrow to burrow in search of a mate. Females breed with only one male, but the male does not assist in rearing the young. The gestation period lasts about a month; young are born in early April to mid-May. Woodchucks have only one litter per year that varies from two to nine young, although the average is four. Six-week old chucks leave the burrow to feed on grasses; they leave the parent's den permanently by early July. Young woodchucks prefer to inhabit abandoned burrows.

Woodchucks reach sexual maturity when they are one year old, although they continue growing until they are two. In general, the woodchuck is considered a solitary animal. Fighting is observed during the breeding season.

Burrows

Burrows are found near woodland edges, in open meadows, near or around buildings, patios and porches, lumber piles or stone fences, and occasionally in urban areas, close to the woodchucks' preferred food. The most obvious evidence of woodchuck presence is a mound of soil and stones at the main burrow entrance. There are normally at least two or three entrances. The burrow may be two to five feet deep and over 60 feet in length.

Feeding

Woodchucks eat mostly grasses and succulent summer plants. Their preferred foods include clover, alfalfa, plantain and herbaceous perennials. They will eat the bark of hickory and maple trees; leaves and buds of aster, chickweed, coneflower, daisy, dandelion, fleabane, goldenrod, wild onion and mustard. They will enter gardens to feed on many vegetables, including beans, broccoli, cabbage and greens, corn, carrot tops, peas, squash, sweet peppers and tomatoes. Woodchucks visit orchards in the fall where they will climb trees to get at fruit that has not fallen. For water, woodchucks depend on dew or on the moisture in succulent plants. For this reason they often feed during early morning and late afternoon hours.

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Hibernation

Woodchucks enter hibernation between mid-September and October and emerge in late February or March. They survive winter by slowing down their body functions.

Economic and Social Values

The woodchuck is an important prey species for a variety of predaceous mammals and birds, including the red fox. Humans may eat them if they are prepared properly. Woodchuck burrows also provide homes for many other species.

Management

Woodchucks are considered a nuisance by homeowners, gardeners and farmers. These animals will feed on crops, gnaw fruit trees and ornamental shrubs and raid small gardens.

The most effective fence for excluding woodchucks from vegetable crops is a four-foot-high hardware cloth fence with an extended section at the base to discourage digging. This ground-level extension should be about a foot long, bent at an L-shaped angle so it protrudes out into the yard, and buried a few inches deep. The top of the fence may be attached loosely to the fence posts and bent outward and toward the ground, to discourage climbing. For additional protection, add an electrified wire four inches above ground in front of the fence to further discourage climbing or burrowing.

Animal removal is usually a short term management option since burrows are frequently re-colonized after the resident woodchuck is no longer there to chase away intruders, and there are many young animals searching for homes each season.

Nuisance woodchucks may be live-trapped in a large trap baited with vegetables such as cabbage, lettuce, apple slices or string beans and set near a burrow entrance. It is illegal to transport wild animals in New York State without a nuisance wildlife permit: you must hire a Nuisance Wildlife Officer to take the animals away. Contact the Cornell Cooperative Extension Diagnostic Lab for a list of local Nuisance Wildlife Officers.

Fumigation may be used to temporarily remove woodchucks. This may be done in April or May if burrow occupants have been clearly identified as woodchucks. Special cartridges, available at garden supply stores, burn slowly to emit a lethal gas. These should **NOT** be used where there are fire hazards, such as under a deck, garage or outbuilding. After you are sure the animals are gone, fill in burrows if you can locate all the entrances. You may consider this a community project, as some entrances may be on your neighbor's property, especially if the yards are small.

Source: Dr. Paul D. Curtis and Kristi L. Sullivan, Cornell Cooperative Extension Wildlife Damage Management Program.

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