

Woodchuck Fact Sheet

INTRODUCTION

Woodchucks (*Marmota monax*) are members of the rodent family Sciuridae that can be found from the Piedmont to the North Georgia mountains. Woodchucks, also known as “groundhogs,” “marmots” or “whistle pigs,” are familiar to many as common residents living in both rural and urban landscapes.

SPECIES DESCRIPTION

As the only member of the genus *Marmota* that is east of the Mississippi River, they are summarily described as a shortlegged, short-tailed furry rodent found in primarily the northern half of Georgia. Their reddish brown fur is grizzled in appearance with shades of yellow and black intermixed. Both their head and tail have a flat appearance about them and their ears are small, rounded and inconspicuous.

Woodchucks breed at one year of age. Mating occurs in March and April with a 31-day gestation period yielding from 2-9 (usually 4-5) offspring annually. Although young are dependent upon the female at first, woodchuck pups are already independent at 8 weeks of age and able to survive on their own.

HABITS AND HABITAT

While many are familiar with the name woodchuck or groundhog from popular tongue-twisters, movies or events such as Groundhog Day, not many are aware of the specific behaviors, habits and habitat in which they live.

Woodchucks prefer open areas such as fields, clearings, open forests and rocky slopes. However, they seem to gravitate toward areas that are more brushy or weedy in nature or areas that have received disturbance at some point and are now “grown up.” Areas such as fencerows, embankments, retaining walls, dams or kudzu patches make for excellent woodchuck living.

Woodchucks are excellent diggers, and among the areas they live, they will dig an extensive network of burrows to provide themselves with increased security from predators. Burrows usually have a main entrance and numerous other side entrances from which to escape from predators such as coyotes, bobcats, foxes, hawks and owls. The series of openings and tunnels lead to a nesting area for sleeping, hibernating and raising young as well as a toilet chamber. Not only do these burrows provide safety and security for woodchucks, but abandoned burrows also are utilized by numerous other species of wildlife such as foxes, skunks, snakes and raccoons.

Aside from intricate burrows developed in areas of awkward terrain, woodchucks have a couple of other methods for evading predators. The first is their ability to climb trees. While considered a ground dwelling species, their sharp claws enable them to quickly climb up a tree and avoid confrontations. The second is their whistling behavior to alert others of danger. From this whistling behavior and their short, stocky appearance, it is easy to see how the name “whistle pig” was coined.

DIET

Woodchucks feed extensively and almost exclusively on plant material. Woodchucks are crepuscular (meaning they are most active in early morning and late evening), so they often are found feeding on a wide variety of grasses, plants, leaves, ferns, fruits and bark during these times. Particular plant favorites include clover and alfalfa, as well as fruits and vegetables when available. When foraging, they must eat quickly as to minimize their time above ground where they are susceptible to predators.

NUISANCE AND DISEASE

While groundhogs can be entertaining to watch, particularly as they are often observed grazing along roadsides, the damage caused from their burrowing activities can be quite problematic. Burrowing along sidewalks, driveways and building foundations can lead to serious damage to structures resulting in potentially costly repairs. Woodchucks also prove to be a nuisance to many gardeners’ as they can destroy an entire garden or flowerbed in a relatively short time.

Dealing with nuisance groundhogs can be frustrating. Fortunately, there are several effective control techniques. There is no closed hunting season on woodchucks, meaning that they may be trapped or shot at any time. Woodchucks can be caught in traditional raccoon-sized traps using fresh fruit or whatever the culprit has been eating as bait. Strawberries, apple slices, salad greens or carrot tops work well. For more stubborn situations, commercial groundhog or woodchuck lures can be purchased. When setting the trap, use logs or other barriers to act as a funnel to guide the target into the trap.

Fumigation to remove woodchucks is a practical and efficient method. Poisonous gas cartridges are one of the most cost effective methods of eradicating nuisance woodchucks. When ignited and placed in a burrow, these cartridges release carbon monoxide gas, killing the woodchuck. For effective control, locate all burrow openings and cover them with sod. Then place the lit gas cartridge in the remaining main hole and cover with sod. Watch the area and if smoke is observed, reseal those holes and place another lit cartridge into the burrow. Because of both health and fire hazards, do not use gas cartridges in burrows underneath homes or structures. For best results, burrows should be treated on cold, rainy days during periods of inactivity.

UTILIZATION

While woodchuck hides are still sometimes used for trim and less expensive fur coats, one of the biggest uses today for woodchuck fur is in the fly tying industry. Using woodchuck hair stoneflies and caddisflies is quite popular and productive for fishing.