



Woodchucks

The woodchuck (*Marmota monax*), also known as the groundhog, is one of the most widely distributed animals in the Northeast. They are rodents and are referred to as ground squirrels, since they belong in the squirrel family (Scuridae), but spend most of their time on or beneath the ground. Their notorious burrows help aerate the soil and provide denning sites and refuge for many other animals, such as rabbits and foxes. Prior to European settlement of North America, the woodchuck was far less common in Rhode Island. Today, suburban lawns, gardens, hedgerows, and sheds elevated on concrete blocks offer an abundance of suitable habitat for woodchucks, making them a common backyard visitor throughout the state.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: The woodchuck can be found from Wisconsin down to northern Mississippi, from North Carolina up to Maine, and north across southern Canada and into central Alaska. Woodchucks thrive in agricultural areas, and commonly occur in open woodlands, fields, suburbs, and urban parks. Their burrows consist of 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.

Behavior: Woodchucks are active during the day and are generally solitary animals. Except for a short time during the mating period, only one adult occupies a burrow. 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, which occurs between October and April in Rhode Island. Like other hibernating animals, the woodchuck gains weight in the summer, building up enough fat reserves to sustain it through the winter.

Reproduction: Woodchuck offspring are born in May in Rhode Island, 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 after giving birth and the young will remain in the burrow until they are about four to five weeks old. After three to four weeks of nursing, the mother will begin to bring green plants into the burrow for the young to feed on. By late June or early July, the young disperse from the den and become independent. Woodchucks have numerous predators including; coyotes, foxes, dogs, fishers, bobcats, and hawks.

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.

Disease: 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 RI Department of Health will confirm one or more positive cases in woodchucks in the state. Any contact between a domestic animal such as a dog or cat and a woodchuck should be reported to your veterinarian and an animal control officer immediately.

IDENTIFICATION

- Large, heavy-bodied rodent with a short, bushy tail and small, round ears
- Grizzled brownish-gray fur with buffy or light yellow belly; top of head, legs, and tail dark brown
- Length: 16-20 in
- Weight: 5-10 lbs
- Lifespan: 3-6 years

LIVING WITH WOODCHUCKS

Woodchucks can cause extensive damage to crops and gardens in a short period 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. They may also gnaw the bark of fruit trees or ornamental shrubs to wear down their incisor teeth, which grow long during their winter hibernation. Simply removing the offending individual will not solve the problem, as another woodchuck will simply move into the newly vacant territory. Preventative measures should be taken to effectively protect gardens and crops.

Regulations: 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.

[Click here](#) to find a Licensed Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist near you.

For additional resources visit:
www.wildlifehelp.org

DID YOU KNOW?

- Woodchucks are also known as groundhogs, whistle pigs, marmots, and ground squirrels.
- Woodchucks make a whistling noise when frightened.
- Unoccupied woodchuck burrows are frequently used by other animals.
- Along with being an excellent digger, the woodchuck is also a capable climber and swimmer.
- Foxes often use woodchuck burrows as den sites for giving birth and raising their pups.
- Woodchucks like to sun bathe.
- Woodchuck dens usually have several entrances, including an emergency exit hole.

TIPS TO PROTECT YARDS & GARDENS:

- Eliminate shelter
 - Keep grass short and remove brush, wood and rock piles
 - Build sheds on concrete if possible.
 - Bury galvanized wire fencing 6 -10in around raised structures in a “L” shape facing outward.
 - Place ammonia-soaked rags in or around burrows to discourage use (replace regularly)
- Fence gardens and fruit trees
 - Put up 3 ft high wire fencing with a slight outward bend to prevent climbing
 - Bury fencing at least 1ft deep on all sides
 - Electric fencing can also be effective
- Treat plants with foul tasting or smelling repellents
 - Capsaicin and dried blood meal can be effective

NEVER INTENTIONALLY FEED WILDLIFE.

This causes problems for both humans and wildlife.