

Woodchucks

Their Ecology and Control

Scott Craven and Stuart Keith

The woodchuck (*Marmota monax*) is a common large rodent found throughout Wisconsin. Other names for the woodchuck include groundhog, whistle pig or marmot. Woodchucks are shy and wary, and when approached, will usually retreat into a den. The animal's retreat may be accompanied by a loud, shrill whistle or a low "chucking" sound. If cornered, woodchucks can be rather bold and have been known to hold their ground and even rush at people.

The woodchuck's claim to fame is Groundhog Day. As legend has it, on February 2 the woodchuck emerges from its burrow. If the woodchuck sees its shadow and is frightened back underground, it means six more weeks of winter. If it doesn't see its shadow and stays out, an early spring is likely. America's "official" groundhog (Jimmy) lives in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, and every Groundhog Day is cause for community celebration. Woodchucks do not "chuck" wood. Therefore, the age-old tongue twister ("How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?") will remain forever unanswered!

Woodchucks can be beneficial, as their abandoned burrows provide homes for rabbits, opossums, foxes and weasels. However, they can also be a serious nuisance for the farmer, gardener, homeowner and property manager.

Identification

Woodchucks belong to the squirrel family. They have short legs, a rotund appearance, and weigh 5 to 10 pounds. Woodchucks are brown overall, but they have a grizzled or frosted appearance because of bands of black and white on individual hairs. The head and body measure from 16–20 inches, and the densely-haired, dark tail adds another 4–7 inches. The sexes appear identical. Their powerful forefeet are equipped with long, curved claws which make them experts in digging burrows. The woodchuck has typical rodent incisors. These chisel-like front teeth are extremely sharp, and can inflict a painful bite.

Range

Woodchucks can be found throughout Wisconsin, but they are more common in agricultural areas where abundant food can support larger numbers. Their populations fluctuate irregularly, but in general, woodchuck numbers have increased since the turn of the century. During periods of abundance, woodchuck densities may reach one animal per two acres and possibly higher.



Habitat and general biology

Woodchucks prefer dry, well-drained soils in open woodlands, field edges and rocky slopes. They have also adapted well to urbanization and live in rock walls, gardens, parks and golf courses. Don't be surprised to see a woodchuck high in a tree—they are capable climbers.

Woodchucks are active primarily during the day (diurnal) and spend most of their time feeding or basking in the sun near their burrows.

Their burrows, which are used for several seasons, can be quite extensive; as deep as five feet and more than 60 feet long. Woodchuck burrows have two or more openings of two types: the main entrance, and plunge holes or "back doors." The main entrance will be surrounded by freshly excavated dirt—a result of construction and the woodchuck's habit of cleaning its burrow several times a week. Fresh soil is an excellent indicator of an active burrow. The plunge holes rarely have any dirt present because they are dug from below the soil surface. They serve primarily as escape routes.

A woodchuck usually stays within several hundred feet of its den. However, this distance may vary in response to food availability. One exception occurs during the spring mating season, when males will travel considerable distances in search of mates.

The mating season lasts from March through April. A female produces one litter per year of two to six (usually four or five) young born after a 32-day gestation period.

The young are independent in about six to eight weeks and leave the den in mid-July. They occupy abandoned dens and, like adults, spend the fall feeding as they prepare for hibernation.

The woodchuck is one of the few true hibernators. That is, it relies entirely on body fat reserves for energy throughout its winter sleep. Woodchucks enter their state of torpor (sleep) sometime in

mid- to late October and remain in hibernation until March or April. Disappearance and emergence may differ by a month or more from southern to northern Wisconsin. Woodchucks will occasionally make a brief winter appearance during a thaw.

Adult woodchucks are quite capable of defending themselves, but young ones are preyed upon by hawks, owls, coyotes, badgers, weasels and dogs. Highway traffic takes a heavy toll on woodchucks of all ages.

Food habits

Woodchucks are primarily vegetarians. They feed on a wide range of fruits and green plants including vegetables, grasses and flowers. Vulnerable crops include peas, beans, corn, carrots, lettuce and other leaf crops, apples and flowers.

Woodchucks will occasionally strip and eat the bark of young saplings, especially during spring. They will eat insects, including grasshoppers, crickets and June bugs, and other invertebrates. They require salt, which they often obtain along roadsides where it accumulates during the winter.

Legal status

Woodchucks are protected by Wisconsin law. There are no specified hunting or trapping seasons. However, landowners or their designees may hunt or trap woodchucks at any time on their property. Apparently, the original motivation for protecting woodchucks was their value in creating cottontail rabbit habitat (burrows).

Damage

Woodchucks cause problems in two ways: feeding and burrowing. As mentioned earlier, they are fond of garden flowers and vegetables, and can quickly destroy a garden. Their burrows can raise havoc with farm equipment. The mounds of dirt at their burrow entrances can damage cutter blades, and livestock can be seriously injured if they stumble in a hole.

In urban settings, they undermine sidewalks, driveways and parking lots, causing expensive damage when cave-ins occur. When they inhabit rock walls, their burrowing removes the dirt between the rocks, causing structural damage and the possibility of wall collapse. Burrowing along building foundations can also result in costly repairs.

As noted, woodchucks can be beneficial and if not causing a problem, they can be fun to watch. Select among the following control options, but please consider lethal control only as a last resort.

Control

Exclusion. Not only are woodchucks proficient burrowers, they are also excellent climbers.

Fencing them out is difficult but not impossible. Use heavy-duty chicken wire or other wire of similar mesh size. Place fencing 10 to 12 inches below and four feet or more above the ground surface. The fencing should have an outward pointing “lip” at the top and especially below ground.

If the fence alone doesn’t work, electrify it. Often, a single strand of electrified wire will be adequate. Garden centers, hardware stores, and farm co-ops can provide materials and advice for electric fences. Don’t let vegetation touch the charged wire, as it could short out the system. An electric fence will also deter raccoons and other four-footed garden pests.

Abatement recommendations contained in this publication were legal under federal and state laws at the time of publication. However, if you live in an urban area, you must check with county, township or city authorities to be sure you are in compliance with local ordinances governing methods like electric fences, pesticides or shooting.

Trapping. Woodchucks can be live-trapped fairly easily. A 24-inch cage-type wire-mesh trap with a 9” x 9” door opening (depending on the size of the offending animal) baited with fresh greens or green vegetables will effectively control a resident population. These traps are available at garden,

hardware, and sporting goods stores, or possibly for rent or loan from a wildlife removal contractor or public agency. Keep your fingers away from the trap when moving the captured animal. Be sure you have the landowner’s consent or a permit from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources before releasing the animal on public land.

Where legal, you can lethally trap woodchucks. Conibear traps (size 160 or 220) can be very effective. Be sure to check with the DNR first; you may need a trapping or small game license. Do not use lethal traps where domestic animals could be harmed. We recommend consulting with or hiring a knowledgeable trapper.

Poisons and fumigants. There are no poisons registered for woodchuck control. However, gas cartridges will effectively eradicate woodchucks. These are available at most farm co-ops, garden centers and hardware stores. Be careful when using these devices, and follow label instructions closely. They are most effective when placed as far back into the burrow as possible, and when soils are moist.

Do not fumigate burrows under or around buildings. The fumigant could seep into the building and endanger occupants. Gas cartridges can also ignite dangerous fires if used carelessly.

Shooting. Where legal, shooting can effectively control woodchucks. This is fine for rural areas, but because of safety hazards and legal restrictions, it is not recommended in urban or suburban settings. Sport shooting of woodchucks using high-powered “varmint” rifles is quite popular in some states. Remember, woodchucks are very wary, so a long-range firearm is essential. Early morning is probably the best time to hunt them. Pick a high vantage point, and be sure you know what you are shooting at and what lies behind your target!

Check the DNR annual hunting regulations for more information.

Contractors. In recent years, small businesses that deal with nuisance wildlife have opened in many parts of Wisconsin. These businesses are usually quite effective at removing and relocating problem wildlife for a reasonable fee. Consult your local yellow pages or a USDA office for recommendations. USDA—Animal Damage Control offices in Rhinelander, Waupun and Sun Prairie can provide additional advice, trap loans, and a referral list of private contractors. Call 1-800-433-0688 for more information.



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