



Eastern Chipmunk

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Photo: Cephas/Wikimedia

Eastern Chipmunk (*Tamias striatus striatus*)

Probably best known for its habit of stuffing its cheeks with nuts, the eastern chipmunk is found in North Carolina only north of a diagonal line bisecting the state from the northeast corner to an area near Charlotte. The English settlers may have wrongly adapted a Chippewa name for this small ground squirrel—*achitaumo* means squirrel in Chippewa, but the Chippewa had a different term for the chipmunk. A Cherokee tale tells of a council of animals plotting revenge on people for hunting. When the chipmunks refused to go along with the plan, the bear raked the chipmunk's back with its claws, leaving the characteristic stripes on either side.

Description

With reddish brown fur, a black stripe down the center of its back and a set of two black stripes, one on either side, the eastern chipmunk has distinctive coloring. Chipmunks from the Carolinas are said to have brighter coloration than those to the north. Much smaller than squirrels, chipmunks measure 8 to 10 inches long, including 3 to 4 inches of tail. The fur of the tail is a darker brown above and rusty underneath and is far less bushy than that of a squirrel.

The chipmunk's ears are small and round, placed high on the head, and the cheeks are marked by lateral stripes. The forepaws contain four slender "fingers" and a non-functioning "thumb." Forepaws are adapted for digging, and hind paws for jumping. Perhaps the chipmunk's most distinguishing feature is its large cheek pouches, in which can be stored a heaping tablespoonful of nuts or seeds. The chipmunk loads each cheek pouch with its front paws through a gap in its side teeth, then unloads its supplies in a storage burrow underground.

History and Status

Probably the earliest description of the eastern chipmunk in North Carolina comes from the journals of explorer John Lawson, who called them "ground squirrels." Their black stripes on reddish fur made them "very beautiful," he said, noting that "they may be kept tame, in a little box with Cotton." He also reported that they were seldom seen in cold weather, "being tender Animals," referring to the chipmunk's winter habit of entering a deep sleep or state of torpor. In Colonial America, settlers dug for the caches of nuts stored in the ground by the industrious ground squirrels over winter.

These days, the lively small mammals thrive within their range, which includes much of the eastern United States and Canada. A larger cousin populates Asia and the western states.

Habitats & Habits

Found in urban and rural habitats alike, the eastern chipmunk prefers open woodlands or forest edges, with plenty of cover and dry hillsides for digging burrows. Each

The eastern chipmunk is also called a "ground squirrel."

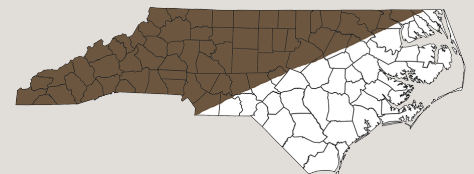


Eastern chipmunk (Photo: Wikimedia)

Range and Distribution

Eastern chipmunks range over much of the eastern United States, from west of the Great Lakes south to the Gulf states and Florida, northward into Canada, skipping the Coastal Plain in the Carolinas and Georgia. North Carolina contains the southeastern edge of their range along the East Coast. The species is common northwest of Raleigh but is not found in the Coastal Plain. In Raleigh and other towns along the dividing line, the small mammal may be found on one side of town and not the other. Western chipmunks (*Eutamias striatus*), a slightly larger genus, are found in the Rocky Mountain states in the United States and in Canada.

Range Map



■ Eastern Chipmunk Range Map

Eastern Chipmunk

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animal digs its own system of narrow tunnels with closed-off emergency exits and a concealed main entrance leading to a main burrow about 3 feet underground. The entrance to the main burrow is usually only 1 ½ inches wide, at times making it necessary for a chipmunk to unload its pouches before entering. The main burrow provides sleeping places and caches for food, and it is kept dry and warm, lined with dry leaves.

The chipmunk is most active in early morning and late afternoon, gathering and storing seeds, nuts, acorns and berries. Other foods include insects, small amphibians and birds. Unlike squirrels, chipmunks spend most of their time foraging on the ground, climbing trees only occasionally. Each chipmunk's trail may be a complicated zigzag from burrow to foraging grounds, and the pattern is repeated over and over again.

The chipmunk's characteristic call is a "chip" or "chuck" sound, repeated from 50 to 130 times a minute. Its alarm cry is a piercing shriek. Burrows provide protection from predators such as hawks, owls, foxes and snakes. The eastern ground squirrel is an important source of food for these small predators. Burrows also provide safe quarters during winter months, when cold weather brings on a state of deep sleep. During this "quasi-hibernation" breathing slows and body temperature is lowered, often for days at a time. Chipmunks remain more active in North Carolina winters, however, than in colder northern climes.

Human Interactions/NCWRC Interactions

Since the days of the Cherokee tale and John Lawson's visit, chipmunks have thrived within their range. Too small ever to have been hunted for fur or meat, the chipmunk is usually safe from human intrusion in its habitat. In western Florida, the southern edge of its range, the eastern chipmunk is considered rare and disturbances to habitat, such as logging and clearing, tend to disturb the population. In Ohio, aerial spraying of malathion reportedly reduced chipmunk populations in affected forests by 55 percent. Found in suitable habitat in both urban and rural settings, the ground squirrel is limited only by soil conditions, predators and availability of food in North Carolina.

References

Webster, William David, James F. Parnell and Walter C. Biggs Jr. *Mammals of the Carolinas, Virginia and Maryland* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).
Tunis, Edwin. *Chipmunks on the Doorstep* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1971).

Credits

Originally written by Marjorie Hudson. Updated by Colleen Olfenbittel, Black bear and furbearer biologist, NCRWC. 2019

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Rodentia

Average Size

Length: 7 to 12 inches
Weight: 1 to 5 ounces

Food

Eastern chipmunks feed mostly on nuts, seeds and berries. Nuts and seeds are stored in underground burrows. They also may eat insects and small amphibians.

Breeding/Young

Breeding occurs in spring and later in early summer, producing two litters per season, 4 or 5 young each. The second litter may overwinter in the burrow with the mother. Chipmunks are born hairless and blind. At 4 weeks their eyes are open, and at 5 to 7 weeks they are able to emerge from the burrow and forage. After 7 to 9 weeks young are digging their own burrows.

Life Expectancy

2 to 3 years in the wild



Eastern chipmunk (Photo: Mangus Mankse)