



Woodchuck

Marmota monax

Sometimes colloquially called “groundhog” or “whistle-pig,” the woodchuck receives its common name from a Cree Indian word, *wuchak*, used to identify several different animals of similar size and appearance and which denotes nothing about the woodchuck’s habits or habitat. Not until Europeans colonized North America did the woodchuck receive the honor of becoming the harbinger of spring. February 2, or Groundhog Day, is the day on which the woodchuck is supposed to wake up from hibernation and emerge from its burrow to determine if winter has ended or will continue for several more weeks.

History and Status

Although woodchucks are native to North Carolina, they have expanded their range in recent years. The woodchuck is classified as a nongame animal for which there is no closed hunting season or bag limit. It is hunted primarily for sport and to a lesser extent for food and fur. Though no data have been collected on woodchuck populations in North Carolina, populations appear to be either increasing or stable. Woodchucks have adapted well to human activities such as agriculture and urban development and are usually considered a pest species. Woodchuck burrows and dens provide homes for other wildlife species that use subterranean den sites.



Description

Woodchucks are large, heavy-bodied rodents attaining weights of 5 to 12 pounds and can be up to 2 feet long. They are covered with coarse hair ranging in color from brown to reddish yellow, usually tipped with silver. Their feet have five claw-bearing digits with thick, slightly curved claws. The head is short and broad. The legs are short and thickset. The tail is densely haired, slightly flattened and one-fifth to one-third of the animal’s total length. The ears are short, broad, rounded and well haired. The eyes are circular and small.

Habitat and Habits

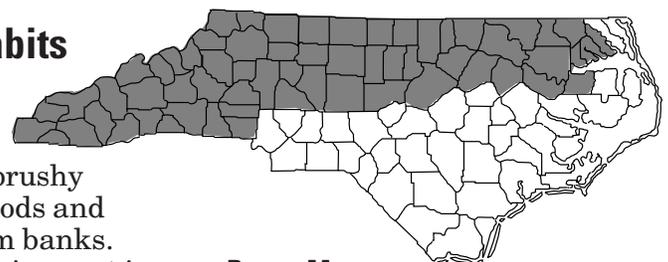
Woodchucks inhabit a variety of habitats such as pastures, brushy woodlots, open woods and areas along stream banks. Their primary requirement is an area where their burrows

can be constructed without being flooded or inundated with groundwater. They are diurnal animals, most active during the early morning and late afternoon hours.

Woodchucks are herbivorous and prefer the more tender parts of new growth from a variety of wild and cultivated plants. They hibernate during the winter from November until February. Mating occurs in March or April, and four to six young are produced after a 31- to 32-day gestation period. The young are born blind, helpless, toothless and almost naked. Young woodchucks disperse from the natal area after they are three months old.

Range and Distribution

Woodchucks are distributed from eastern Alaska across the southern half of Canada to the



Range Map:
Occupied range

WILD Facts

Atlantic Ocean and south in the eastern half of the United States to Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina. East of the Appalachian Mountains, North Carolina is the southernmost part of the woodchuck's range. The woodchuck was historically confined to the Mountains of western North Carolina but has recently expanded its range into the Piedmont and Coastal Plain regions.

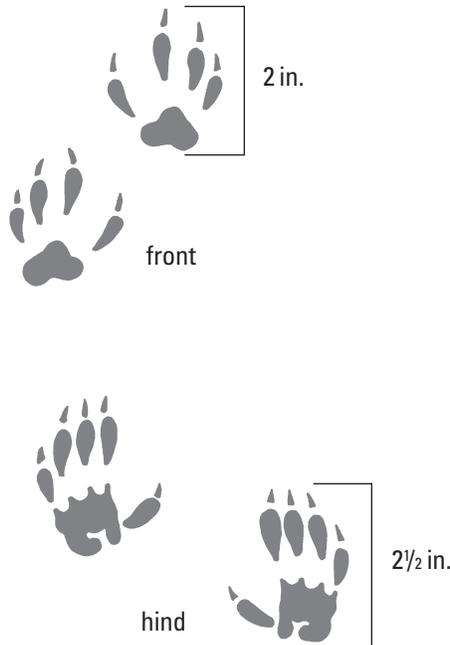
People Interactions

Unless you live and stay in the southern half of North Carolina from Mecklenburg County east, you have certainly seen woodchucks by the roadside in spring or early summer. Their habit of feeding on roadside vegetation causes many woodchucks to be killed by cars. Other than a few predators such as hawks, owls, foxes and coyotes, the major causes of mortality for woodchucks are vehicles on highways and hunters in pastures. Woodchuck hunting provides a service to the landowner whose crops suffer depredation from the rodent's feeding habits or whose livestock have been lamed by stepping into a woodchuck burrow. This sport also provides the opportunity for someone skilled with a rifle to practice this skill during a time of year when hunting seasons for game animals are closed. Even with increased numbers of highways and woodchuck hunters, this species continues to expand its range in North Carolina.

References

Chapman, J.A., and G.A. Feldhamer, eds. *Wild Mammals of North America: Biology, Management and Economics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

Robinson, S.S., and D.S. Lee. "Recent Range Expansion of the Groundhog, *Marmota Monax*, in the Southeast." *Brimleyana* 3 (1980): 43-48.



Credits

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Produced January 1997 by the Division of Conservation Education, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

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WOODCHUCK

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

Average Size

Length: 20 to 27 in.

Weight: 5 to 12 lbs.

Food

Woodchucks are herbivorous and prefer succulent plants such as clover, alfalfa, and grasses.

Breeding

Sexually mature at 1 year old. Males generally mate with one female from late February to April. Females breed only once per year, but males may remain with the female for some time after breeding.

Young

Groundhog gestation period is 31 to 32 days. Litter size is four to six. At birth they weigh about 1 oz. and increase to about 2 oz. in one week. The young are born blind and hairless, are weaned in about 2 months, and disperse by 5 months. Groundhogs usually have two litters a year.

Life Expectancy

Average 1 to 2 years. Few live longer than 4 years in the wild.