

# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### WOODCHUCK

*Marmota monax*



**Habitat:** Woodland edges, thickets and fields.

**Weight:** 5 to 10 pounds.

**Length:** 16 to 20 inches, and a 6-inch tail. Males are slightly larger than females.

**Food:** Succulent plants such as clover, alfalfa, garden vegetables and grasses. They will also eat tree leaves, buds and fruits.

**Identification:** Woodchucks are stocky mammals, with short, strong legs and a short, bushy, almost flattened tail. Their fur ranges from light to dark brown, with lighter guard hairs, giving them a frosted appearance. The ears can close over the ear openings to keep out debris while underground. The feet are dark brown to black; the front feet have long, curved claws for digging burrows.

**Range:** The woodchuck's range extends from eastern Alaska, through much of Canada, into eastern United States south to northern Georgia. Woodchucks are common throughout Connecticut.

**Reproduction:** Usually woodchucks breed in their second year, but a small percentage may breed as a yearling. The breeding season extends from early March to middle or late April following hibernation. A mated pair will remain in the same den through the 28- to 32-day gestation period. As birth of the young approaches in April or May, the male will leave the den. One litter is produced annually, usually containing two to six blind, naked and helpless young. Young wood-

chucks are weaned and ready to seek their own dens at five to six weeks of age.

**History in Connecticut:** Before the early settlers arrived in this country, most of Connecticut was forested land. Woodchucks lived in the scattered forest openings. As land was cleared for farms and houses, this highly adaptable animal also found suitable habitat in the fields and along the forest edge. The new habitat actually provided a more reliable source of food and the woodchuck is more abundant now than it was during Colonial times.

**Interesting Facts:** Classified as rodents, woodchucks, or groundhogs, are related to mice, squirrels, porcupines and beavers.

Woodchucks emit a shrill whistle when alarmed, followed by a chattering "tchuck, tchuck" sound.

Woodchucks are excellent diggers; they dig both simple and complex burrow systems, the depth and length depending on the type of soil. Most burrows are 25 to 30

feet long and from two to five feet deep, with at least two entrances. The main entrance is often the most conspicuous, with a large mound of freshly dug dirt nearby. The other, less visible entrances are used for escape purposes. A nesting chamber for sleeping and raising the young is found at the end of the main tunnel; a separate toilet chamber helps keep the burrow clean. Woodchucks may have two burrows: a winter den, in a wooded area, and also a summer den, in open flat or gently rolling areas.

During the warmer months, woodchucks are commonly seen in the early morning or late afternoon. During midday hours, they might sleep in the sun on rocks or logs near the safety of the burrow entrance. Even while feeding, they usually will not venture more than a few hundred yards away from the burrow entrance. Woodchucks rely on their keen hearing and sense of smell to give them enough time to escape to their dens when danger is near. They can be fierce fighters when cornered by their enemies, which include man, dogs, coyote, foxes, bear, hawks and owls, bobcat, mink and weasels.

The woodchuck is one of the few mammals classified as a true hibernator. During four to five months in winter, the heart, respiration and overall metabolism rates of true hibernators are greatly reduced and the animals are nourished from their fat reserves. Toward the end of summer, as cooler weather begins, woodchucks increase their feeding activity; a good layer of fat is essential for a long hibernation. By the end of October, most woodchucks have begun their winter sleep in nests of dried grass and leaves located in burrows well below the frost line. Woodchucks arise slowly from hibernation during February and March. Males usually awaken first and travel to nearby dens where females are hibernating to begin breeding.

Although woodchucks are primarily terrestrial, they can climb trees up to 15 feet or more to escape an enemy

and to even feed on the berries and leaves of some trees such as red mulberry and hackberry; they also take to the water and are good swimmers.

The abandoned burrows of woodchucks are used for den sites or escape cover by a variety of wildlife, including skunks, raccoons, foxes, rabbits, opossums, weasels and snakes.

**Management of Nuisances:** Woodchuck damage can usually be classified into three categories:

- (1) Damage to crops caused by feeding in farm fields and/or home gardens.
- (2) Burrow holes and dirt mounds which hamper operation of farm equipment and can pose a threat to horses and livestock.
- (3) Damage to fruit and ornamental trees caused by woodchucks gnawing for scent marking or clawing to wear down the winter growth of their teeth and sharpen their claws.

The most permanent method of controlling woodchucks, and other wildlife, in a garden situation is by erecting a fence. A sturdy fence at least three feet high will keep most medium-sized animals out. However, woodchucks may try to burrow under the fence. It is recommended that the fence extend underground another one to two feet. Woodchucks have also been known to climb over fences, in which case a one-foot extension that is bent outward at a 90-degree angle should be added to the top of the fence. Placement of an electric hot shot wire four inches above the ground and at the top of the fence will further prevent woodchucks from climbing the fence.

Certain insecticides sprayed on garden vegetables (follow label instructions) may work as a repellent, but these have had only limited success.

Woodchucks can be hunted most of the year with no daily or seasonal limits; check the current hunting and trapping guide for periods when the season is closed.



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