

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



June 17, 2015

“How much wood would a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?”

If the frequent calls we receive at Conservation are any indication, many of you have encountered the animal immortalized in this familiar tongue-twister. The origin of the word woodchuck, however, doesn't have anything to do with wood or chucking but rather comes from the Algonquian name for the animal, *Wuchak*.

Marmota monax is a member of the ground squirrel family of rodents that also includes chipmunks and prairie dogs. Woodchucks are found across the eastern United States and Canada wherever there's open country and edge habitat. Woodchucks are one species whose populations increased following settlement as forests were cleared and predatory wolves, cougars, bobcats, bears, and eagles were extirpated from the land.

Woodchucks are easy to recognize with their brownish-gray color; compact, chunky bodies; short, strong legs; two large incisors; and sharp front claws. The location of their eyes, ears, and nose toward the top of their head enables them to peek out of their burrows without being seen. When alarmed, the hairs on their short, brown tails stand straight up, resembling a hair brush.

Woodchucks are good swimmers and tree climbers. Did you know they climb trees to survey their surroundings? They are also excellent burrowers. One woodchuck may move up to 35 cubic feet of soil to create a burrow with tunnels located 5 feet deep and up to 65 feet long where they mate, raise their young, sleep, and go to the bathroom. In other words, if you find droppings in your yard, it isn't a woodchuck invading your space. Their burrows also provide protection from predators. Snakes are an exception, though, and one of the greatest threats to young woodchucks.

Woodchucks are diurnal creatures, coming above ground to feed during the early morning and evening hours. They are mostly herbivorous and in the wild will eat up to 1 1/2 pounds of clovers, grasses, leaves, and fruit daily while farmers and gardeners provide beans, peas, alfalfa, and soybeans.

Many people hold negative feelings about woodchucks, but woodchucks also offer positive contributions. Their old dens become homes for other animals, and their digging activity loosens the soil. Woodchucks have even uncovered an archaeological site in Ohio. Who knows, maybe someday you'll benefit from ongoing research into their complex physiology. Woodchucks are one of the few animals to undergo true hibernation as their body temperature drops to 37° F, their respiration drops to 1 breath per 6 minutes, and their heart rate drops to 4 beats a minute. Perhaps the answer to long distance space travel or life-saving medical treatment lies at the bottom of the woodchuck's winter burrow.

Until then, we'll have to learn to appreciate woodchucks in the wild while discouraging them from taking over our houses, yards, and cemeteries. Be forewarned, though. Unless you can somehow change the habitat or perhaps import some snakes, another woodchuck will probably move in.

