

Groundhog

Marmota monax

The groundhog, like many animals that call the Chicago River watershed home, is often misunderstood, sometimes persecuted, and yet finds a way to thrive. These fascinating creatures are more common than you may think in and around Chicago.

Groundhogs, also known as woodchucks, are one of the larger members of the rodent family. Adults can weigh up to 14 pounds and be 28 inches long. On average, male groundhogs are slightly larger than females.

Groundhogs are mainly herbivores. They eat wild grasses and other vegetation, preferring clover, dandelion, coltsfoot, buttercup, agrimony, raspberries, plantain, wild lettuce, and alfalfa. However, groundhogs occasionally eat grubs, snails, grasshoppers, and other small insects.

Despite their stocky appearance, groundhogs are accomplished swimmers and can even climb trees. Appropriately, Native Americans observed the groundhog's primary activity and called them "wuchak" which means "digger." They are excellent diggers, excavating extensive multi-use burrows with separate chambers for sleeping, rearing young, and for waste. Groundhog burrows always have at least two entrances, providing an escape route from predators.

Groundhogs are beneficial to the larger ecosystem. They are a food source for coyotes, bobcats, wolves, foxes, lynxes and black bears. Abandoned burrows provide homes for other animals including skunks, red foxes, and cottontail rabbits. In addition to providing homes for itself and other animals, the groundhog aids in soil improvement by bringing subsoil to the surface and allowing water infiltration.

Groundhogs are also one of the true hibernators. In winter they curl up in their dens. As they settle down their body temperature drops to as low as 37°F and heart rates slow from about 80 beats per minute to five.

Human activity has both helped and harmed the groundhog. Farms and forest preserves have increased food abundance and limited predators, allowing groundhogs to thrive on the edges of our city. However, this is a double-edged sword, as human development, hunting, and habitat loss are also the biggest threats to their survival.

