

Exploring Ohio Wildlife: Groundhogs

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Throughout our Ohio Wildlife series, we have looked at some of the animals that call Ohio home. These animals come in a variety of sizes, colors, and behaviors that make them all unique in some way. This installment looks at another animal found well throughout Ohio in all 88 counties, the woodchuck, otherwise known as the groundhog. How much do you know about this animal such as its habitat, behavior, or how many there are? Read on to find out more!

Many are likely most familiar with the groundhog when it comes to Groundhog's Day that takes place every February 2nd and the famous Punxsutawney Phil. People come to see this groundhog to see if he will see his shadow, indicating six more weeks of winter, or if he does not see his shadow which tells us that an early spring is on the way. During the rest of the year, the groundhog enjoys the peace and quiet of being by itself.

Groundhogs are the type of animal that prefers to be by themselves for many of its days. According to National Geographic, they search for plants and grass for most of their days, in addition to, digging burrows in the soil which can reach upwards of 66 feet long. These burrows will usually be found near generally open areas such as meadows or farmland, proving to be much of a nuisance to many landowners and farmers. They like the open areas because it allows them to easily keep an eye on their predators. According to ODNR, the entrance to their burrows are signified by a large mound of dirt around an opening with more than one entrance and several paths or rooms found underneath the surface.

Even though the burrows may be a nuisance to us, they are quite important for the groundhogs. Burrows serve as the shelter for the groundhog providing them with protection from their predators such as coyotes or hawks, while also serving as a place to raise their families, according to National Geographic. Their burrows are designed in a way that has a room to serve a purpose such as sleeping, nesting, and their restroom. Should a groundhog move out, it is not too uncommon for animals such as chipmunks or rabbits to take up residence.

Woodchucks have not always been regularly populated in Ohio as many may think. According to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), at the time Ohio was settled, woodchucks (groundhogs) were a rare sight to see but as the land was opened for agricultural production, populations went on the increase. The groundhog has a broad and flat head with small eyes and ears. Their fur has a gray-brown color with a red hue and their legs are usually dark brown or black and are readily equipped for digging. A routine diet for the groundhog will include primarily plant items such as grass, clover, soybeans, lettuce, apples; although they will eat some insects and snails.

Through the winter months, groundhogs are nowhere to be seen and thus do not serve as much of a nuisance during this time. During this time, they will crawl down into their burrows and hibernate the winter away.

Upon completion of hibernation when the first warm spring days arrive, the male woodchuck (groundhog) sets out to find a female mate. According to ODNR, once they find one mate, the male will search for more to mate with during their mating season which will usually last from March till May and will stay in the burrow until the female shoos him away prior to her giving birth to the young.

Groundhogs are born hairless in litters of about 2 to 7 and weighing about 1.5oz, growing very fast in the weeks that follow. ODNR writes that by the time the young reach 9 to 11 weeks, then den becomes tight on space and the mother will shoo her young out of the burrow into a nearby one still taking care of them. The mother will continue to care for them throughout their development until they leave the burrow and create their own.

How can you prevent groundhogs from being a nuisance? According to the Farmer's Almanac, installing a wire mesh fence around your garden can be a good way to prevent them from feeding on your gardens and crops. It is important to make sure this fence goes at least two feet into the ground given their digging abilities. Kitty litter has also proven to be a deterrent for groundhogs as they will mistake the smell given off as urine from one of their predators. Stay tuned for more features of Ohio wildlife and be sure to follow us on Facebook where every Friday afternoon we feature an animal as part of #FurryFriday!