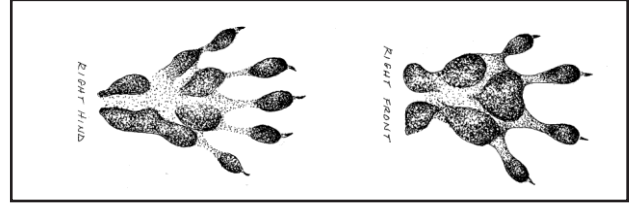
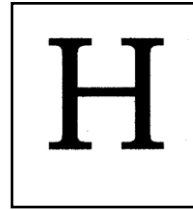
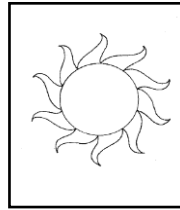


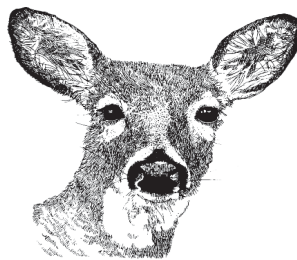


Woodchuck
Family Sciuridae
Marmota monax



Not many rodents have a day named after them, but the woodchuck does. Better known as groundhogs, **every child in the United States knows that February 2nd is Groundhog Day**, especially every child in Pennsylvania.

Common throughout the state, their ideal habitat ranges from farm fields, orchards, suburban areas, thick fencerows bordering cultivated crop rows or any habitat closely resembling these. Burrows are dug under dead stumps or at tree bases so the roots can shelter the den entrances. Some burrows can be found in the middle of an open field, but they usually choose a field edge or border for more protection.



Like the red fox and white-tailed deer, **woodchucks have benefitted from our state's habitat alteration** from forests to cleared fields and farmland. Over the past several hundred years, their numbers have continued to climb and today they are all among our most common mammals.

Woodchucks are built for digging. Their short powerful legs, claws and strong bodies are well adapted for creating burrows and living underground. They loosen the soil with their strong forefeet before kicking it out behind them with their hind feet. Burrows are designed to drop at a sharp angle below the entry hole before leveling into narrow tunnels that serve as both escape hatches and hibernaculums. Excavated dirt is piled at the burrow's main entrance and used as a look-out post.

Despite its short legs, **woodchucks can run rather fast** over short distances. **They can also climb trees**, ascending and descending trees head first. Their short, flattened bodies afford them good balance and they can be seen walking easily along wooden fence rails. When they **sit upright**, their front paws help them hold plants while feeding.



Woodchucks are about two feet long including a furred, six-inch tail. They may weigh up to 15 pounds and are at their heaviest in the fall as they fatten up for **winter hibernation**. Their coat varies from yellowish-brown to blackish-brown with darker feet. **As true herbivores**, woodchucks eat just about any kind of plant. They especially love clover, alfalfa, dandelion greens, and any fresh crops in the home garden.

Well-suited for life underground, a woodchuck's eyes, ears and nose are placed on the top of its head. This allows the woodchuck to observe its surroundings from the safety of its burrow. Their senses of sight, hearing and smell are keen and no matter what they are doing, their head will go up every few moments to check for danger.

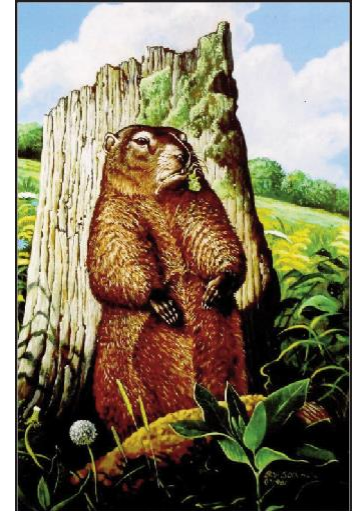
Woodchucks do make sounds. They will whistle for an alarm call, make a "chuck-chuck" sound when eating and chatter their teeth when frightened or cornered.



Woodchucks are true hibernators. They eat heavily throughout summer and early fall to accumulate body fat before they begin denning up after the first frosts in late October. Their body temperature and heartbeat drop drastically as they go into a dormant state, surviving the winter using their own body fat. In mid-winter male woodchucks emerge from their dens to find and breed with females. Newborn chucks are born in April and early May. By summer they are ready to leave their home burrows and establish their own territories.

Woodchucks can cause serious damage on farms. They love corn when it's in the milk stage and can devastate both crops and backyard gardens. But the real danger from groundhogs living in pastures and meadows comes from their burrows. Livestock can easily step into the deep holes and break a leg, causing loss of life or expensive veterinary treatment.

In Pennsylvania, woodchucks are allowed to be hunted during small game season. Despite pressure from hunting, their populations continue to rise and they are stable throughout the state. Although their abundance can be a problem, their ability to create numerous burrows **provides tremendous habitat opportunities for many other species**, such as skunks, foxes.

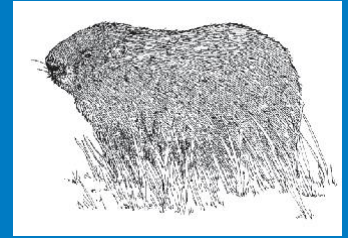


Nowhere is **Groundhog Day** more celebrated than in Pennsylvania, when we wait to see if the furry rodent emerges from his burrow and sees his shadow. If he sees his shadow, it means six more weeks of winter. Other states may also celebrate this day, but it all started in Pennsylvania with "**Punxsutawney Phil**," also known as the original prognosticator.

No doubt, somewhere on February 2nd, the sun will be shining and a groundhog will see his shadow. Since February 2nd is about six weeks from the start of spring, it's easy to see how this celebration got started. **But the real reason those groundhogs are emerging from their den is to search for a mate in the frigid winter air.** Perhaps, like us, they are just impatient for spring weather to arrive.



A Simple Review of Woodchucks



You probably know woodchucks as groundhogs, thanks to Groundhog Day. **Groundhogs cannot really forecast how long winter will last.** They come out of their underground burrows in late winter for another reason. But these big cousins of the squirrel can do some neat things. **They can swim. They can climb trees. They can whistle.** They also help a lot of other animals that live in their same habitat by digging underground burrows that foxes, rabbits, skunks or others may take over.

Groundhogs are short-legged, rotund rodents with brownish-gray coarse fur and a bushy black tail. Each of their front feet has four toes, and each of their hind feet has five toes. They are **herbivores with large front incisors**, perfect for snipping off plants like grass, dandelions and clover. They need very little water since most of their liquid comes from the plants they feed on. Their eyesight and hearing are both superb and although they live close to the ground, **they will stand on their hind legs constantly on the lookout for danger.**

They live in hay fields, pastures and meadows in soil that is loose and dry, ideal for digging. **In late October–early November they will settle into their den for hibernation**, after fattening up throughout the summer and early fall. While in hibernation, their body temperature drops to just above freezing, and their heartbeat almost stops. By February, woodchucks begin to emerge from their dens as the mating season begins.



Groundhog Day first began in Pennsylvania back in 1887. Actually, groundhogs are the only animals to have their own national holiday. Today, February 2nd is celebrated just about everywhere in our country, but nowhere is it more famous than in **Punxsutawney, PA.** No groundhog is better known than Punxsutawney Phil. If the groundhog sees his shadow, it means six more weeks of winter. If he does not see his shadow, it means we will have an early spring. But **the real reason groundhogs are out in February is to look for a mate** in winter instead of waiting until spring.

If there is snow on the ground, you can see muddy footprints at a den's entrance as the male groundhog moves from den to den in search of a female. The females usually don't emerge from dens until March. Four to five pups are usually born in April or May. Until they are weaned at about six weeks, the mother brings fresh greens into the burrow to feed the growing pups after they are done nursing.

As much fun as we have with Groundhog Day, real **groundhogs can cause real problems** for farmers. Their burrows create large holes in pastures that cows or horses may step into and hurt themselves. The woodchucks can damage crops, too.