



# Woodchuck

## Ecology & Damage Management



The woodchuck (*Marmota monax*), otherwise known as the groundhog or whistle pig, is a large rodent common in Wisconsin. It is said they can predict how soon spring will arrive, a legend that has made annual celebrities out of more than a few of these animals. Folk tales aside, woodchucks are part of the natural environment and, as with many species of wildlife, their behavior and habits can be both a benefit and a nuisance.

### DESCRIPTION

Woodchucks are round, short-legged animals that belong to the squirrel family. They measure 16-27 inches from nose to tail-tip and weigh between 5 and 10 pounds. Their tail is short relative to their body size, typically only about 4-7 inches long. Woodchucks are brown overall, but may have a frosted appearance because each individual hair is tipped with black and white bands. Being expert burrowers, they have powerful forefeet with long, curved claws. They also have very sharp chisel-like front teeth.



Male and female woodchucks appear identical, but males can be slightly larger. Because of their short legs, woodchucks are generally slow runners but can scurry quickly to the safety of their dens if they sense danger. They are shy and usually will retreat into a den if approached, but if they are cornered or feel threatened they may become aggressive. Woodchucks are diurnal animals, which means they are active during the day. They spend this time feeding and basking in the sun outside their burrows. Woodchucks are excellent climbers so it is not uncommon to spot one in a tree.

### HABITS AND HABITAT - Biology, Reproduction and Behavior

Woodchucks are found throughout Wisconsin, most commonly in agricultural and other areas with abundant food sources. They prefer dry soils in open woodlands, farmlands and field edges but have adapted to urban settings and can be found living in gardens, parks, and golf courses. Burrows are the most common indicator of the animal's presence. Woodchuck burrows are found in fields; along roadsides, fencerows and stone walls; near building foundations and at the base of trees. The burrows

themselves can be up to five feet deep and 60 feet or more long. Woodchucks normally stay within several hundred feet of their dens, and will only travel long distances to find food or during mating season when males search for mates. Mating season is from March to April. Females produce one litter of two to six young per year. The gestation period is 32 days long. The young leave the den around mid-July, when they can survive on their own.

## HABITS AND HABITAT – Biology, Reproduction and Behavior (continued)

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When woodchucks are startled, they emit a shrill whistle alarm call. Following the alarm call, they make a low warble that sounds like “tchuck, tchuck.” Adult woodchucks are good at defending themselves, but hawks, owls, coyotes, badgers, weasels and dogs may prey upon young animals. Highway traffic causes mortality in woodchucks of all ages.

Woodchucks are mostly vegetarian and feed on a variety of fruits and green plants. They prefer to feed

in the early morning and evening. Because of their diet preferences, they may damage or make off with peas, beans, corn, carrots, lettuce, apples, and other garden crops. Woodchucks may also eat flowers, insects, salt and the bark of young trees.

Woodchucks are true hibernators, which means they rely entirely on body fat reserves for energy while they sleep through winter. Woodchucks typically hibernate from October to March or April.

## IDENTIFYING WOODCHUCK DAMAGE

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There are two ways in which woodchucks can cause problems to property as a result of their feeding and burrowing habits. As mentioned above, their taste for flowers and vegetables and constant gnawing can cause damage in orchards and nurseries, on farms and in home gardens. Damage to crops such as alfalfa, soybeans, beans, squash, and peas can be extensive. They gnaw and claw fruit trees and ornamental shrubs. Woodchucks have been known to gnaw on underground power cables, which can cause electrical outages. Even rubber hoses in vehicles, such as those used for vacuum and fuel lines, have been found with woodchuck gnaw marks.

Their burrowing can pose problems in both rural and urban locations. Cutter blades on farm equipment can

be damaged from the mounds of dirt at their burrow entrances, and livestock can be seriously injured if they stumble into woodchuck holes. Horses and their riders can be injured this way as well.

In urban settings, their tunnels can cause driveways and parking lots to cave in and rock walls to collapse. Their burrowing along building foundations can cause damage that undermines the whole structure, resulting in costly repairs.



Jake Dingle, Pennsylvania GameCommission

## LEGAL STATUS

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Woodchucks are protected under Wisconsin state law. There are no specified hunting or trapping seasons. However, landowners may hunt or trap woodchucks without a license whenever damage is occurring on

their property. For additional legal information, please refer to the “Laws and Regulations” fact sheet on the Wildlife Damage Management website (available at [wildlifedamage.uwex.edu](http://wildlifedamage.uwex.edu)).

## CONTROLLING WOODCHUCK DAMAGE

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While various damage and conflict issues have just been discussed it is important to remember that woodchucks do not have malicious intent and are just trying to live in an ever-shrinking habitat. The following damage management methods will help to determine the best approach to successfully resolve your situation.

### NON-LETHAL METHODS

#### Exclusion

Not many people think of woodchucks as climbers, but their skill in this area is surprising. As a result,

fencing them out requires a two-angle approach. The fence should be made from metal mesh/wire material, extend 10 to 12 inches below the soil surface and be at least four feet tall above ground. It should have an outward pointing “lip” both at the top and especially under ground.

If the fence by itself doesn’t fix the problem, an electric fence may be necessary. Usually a 2-foot-tall electrified wire fence, with a single strand of wire placed about 6 inches above the ground and then every 6 inches thereafter will do. Garden centers, hardware stores, and

farm co-ops can provide materials and advice for installing electric fences. However, it is important that vegetation does not come in contact with the charged wire; this could short out the whole system. An added bonus of using an electric fence is that it will also discourage other garden intruders such as raccoons.

If an electric fence is used, please ensure that signs are visible noting that an electric fence is in use. Also, caution and common sense should be used when using electric fences near children and pets.

### **Harassment**

Various harassment techniques have been shown to be successful to deter problem woodchucks. The use of a scarecrow or a motion-activated device that sprays water, makes noise, or uses lights has proven effective. However, once an animal grows accustomed to the harassment and realizes that it is not a danger, the effectiveness can fade. One way to remedy this is to rotate and switch up your harassment arsenal to keep the woodchuck off guard. Harassment options can be bought locally or on the Internet.

### **Live trapping**

A 24-inch cage-type wire mesh trap with a 9x9-inch door opening, baited with fresh greens, plum tomatoes, or apples will usually be enough to effectively control a local woodchuck population. The open door of the trap should be placed next to the burrow opening. By law, an open trap must be checked at least once every 24 hours. These traps can be purchased at hardware, farm or sporting goods stores. They may also be available for rent or loan from a wildlife removal contractor or public agency. When it comes time to move the captured animal, be sure to keep fingers away from the animal. You must have the landowner's consent to release wildlife on private land you don't own, or a permit from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) to release it on public land.

### **Contractors**

The increase in urbanization over the years has spurred a rise in human/wildlife conflicts, which in turn has created a market for nuisance wildlife control. For a reasonable fee, a nuisance wildlife control operator will remove and relocate problem animals. Consult your local yellow pages, local Wisconsin DNR office, or the Wisconsin Wildlife Control Operators Association to find a nuisance control operator.

## **LETHAL METHODS**

### **Shooting**

Where the law allows, shooting can solve a woodchuck problem. However, this is typically recommended only for rural areas and not in urban settings because of the safety hazards and legal restrictions involved. For further details about laws and regulations governing lethal control of woodchucks, please refer to the wildlife damage fact sheet titled "Laws and Regulations." It is also important to remember the natural behavior of woodchucks when undertaking such a control method. Early morning is probably the best time to hunt them. These animals are extremely wary, so a long-range firearm is essential. Be absolutely sure at what you are shooting AND of what lies beyond your target before you shoot.

### **Lethal trapping**

In certain areas it is legal to lethally trap woodchucks using an appropriately sized body-gripping trap. However, it is important that you first check with the Wisconsin DNR to ascertain whether a trapping license is required and ensure you are familiar with all trapping laws and regulations.

### **Fumigants**

Gas cartridges labeled for use to control burrowing rodents are effective in killing woodchucks within their burrows. The cartridges produce carbon monoxide gas that kills the woodchuck by depriving it of oxygen. Gas cartridges are a General Use Pesticide and are available from local farm supply stores and some garden centers and hardware stores.

In order to carry out this control method correctly you need to find all the entrances to the burrow system and plug all but one with soil or some other material that will lock in the gas. Light the fuse and put the cartridge inside the remaining hole and then quickly cover it to prevent the gas from escaping. Some people recommend taping the cartridge to a stick or other semi-flexible pole and conducting a trial run before actually lighting it. The stick allows deeper placement of the cartridge inside the burrow, and practicing will give you an indication of any quick turns the burrow may take. Of course, this method is only effective if the woodchuck is actually in the burrow you fumigate. You can test a burrow for activity by filling all entrances with dirt or grass clippings and

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This fact sheet is part of a series designed to help you successfully manage wildlife damage problems on your property. The series includes additional publications which focus on controlling damage from specific animals, plus an introduction to wildlife damage management.

## CONTROLLING WOODCHUCK DAMAGE (continued from page 3)

then checking in 12 to 24 hours. If a woodchuck is inside, it will come out to feed during this period. Observing the woodchuck entering the burrow before fumigating is best. Alternatively, fumigating a burrow prior to the woodchuck awaking from hibernation is also an option.

As always, it is important to consider safety precautions. Do not fumigate burrows under or around buildings because the expelled gas could leak into the building and harm occupants. Gas cartridges create an ignition hazard and should be handled carefully around flammable areas and substances.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND FURTHER READING

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This publication is available in pdf format at: [wildlifedamage.uwex.edu](http://wildlifedamage.uwex.edu)

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