

Living with wildlife - woodchucks

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EMC Lifestyle - The woodchuck (*Marmota monax*), sometimes called groundhog - is one of the few true hibernators in our area. The others are meadow jumping mice and woodland jumping mice.

Hibernation is a process of deep comatose sleep when body temperature can drop to just above freezing and the heartbeat from its normal rate of 80 beats per minute to only four or five.

It explains why the woodchuck needs to spend much of the spring and summer noshing on greens most of the day. They are herbivore, or plant eaters, who rely on clover, dandelions, buttercups, alfalfa and garden vegetables if they can get them.

They maintain a summer den that is close to their food source given that they are at risk if they venture too far away from it. You will often see them near burrows along roads that have mounds of earth or berms along the side because they offer good drainage.

Burrows generally have a main entrance and one or more escape holes for added safety, along with separate toilet and nesting chambers. The nesting chamber is slightly elevated from the lowest part of the tunnel so as to keep it dry.

The young who are born in May are blind and helpless at birth, weighing less than two ounces. They develop quickly, having made the transition from mother's milk to solid foods when they start to emerge from the burrow at five to six weeks old. Woodchucks must put on a lot of weight over the summer before they disappear, generally in late September in this area, into their den for the long winter hibernation.

While they are not at all aggressive animals - a friend calls them the 'little Mennonites of the meadow,' they can, with their grumpy expression and no-nonsense strut, chase off interlopers. We once watched a woodchuck put the run to a deer at the centre. With mission accomplished, the woodchuck returned to his post, standing on hind legs and looking all around to see who he had impressed.

Woodchucks are major hole-digging mammals that supply shelter for other wildlife such as foxes and skunks that are critical in keeping mice and insect populations in check. In nature, everything is connected and everything serves a purpose.

There is good advice for keeping them out of your garden or from under your porch on our web site.

Remember this is still the height of the birthing season so check out www.wildlifeinfo.ca before taking any action.

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