

The Woodchuck

by Sally Cureton

One of the more common sights around Massanutten is a **woodchuck** (*Marmota monax*). Frequently referred to as a groundhog, it is the only marmot in the eastern United States and across most of Canada. It is a rodent and a member of the squirrel family. They are generally about 20-27 inches long and weigh from 5 to 10 pounds. A woodchuck has very keen sight, hearing and smell. It is always on the lookout for predators, but not too bothered by the presence of humans. A shrill whistle sound is made when alarmed. Even though it lives on and underground, it can swim and climb trees.

Generally the woodchuck is not a very social animal, which would explain why we only see one at a time around here. Under a stump or rock, it will excavate a burrow, which can be up to 30 feet long. There will be several entrances. The main one is usually obvious and is generally 8 to 12 inches across with mounds of dirt around it. This entrance can also be located by tracks in late spring snowfalls and in mud around the entrances. The other entrances are "emergency exits" from the burrow and will be more difficult to spot. This guy is so efficient at digging, that a small burrow can be finished in one day. Skunks, foxes, opossums and rabbits will use these homes once the woodchuck has left. The role of this little animal as a builder of homes for other animals is truly significant. In addition, his building method of turning over mounds of dirt while digging has contributed much to fertilizing and aerating millions of tons of soil each year.

This is an animal that goes into a true hibernation each year. It will put on a heavy layer of fat each fall, go into its den, cover the hole with dirt, roll into a ball and go to sleep. This usually occurs by the end of October. During this time its body temperature lowers to about 40 degrees, and its heart rate slows to about 4 beats per minute. Breathing also becomes very, very slow. Sometime in February the woodchuck will emerge from this long sleep and the breeding season begins. Female woodchucks are pregnant for 31-33 days, so that the babies will be born near the end of March. Litters generally consist of about 4 or 5 kits that are about 4 inches long. Their eyes open at about 4 weeks although they rarely venture out of the burrow until about 6 or 7 weeks of age. By midsummer, they will be about 20 inches long and weigh about 4 pounds. Soon afterwards they begin leaving the burrow and begin living on their own.

Woodchucks are almost complete vegetarians. It will eat leaves, flowers, and soft stems of various plants. It will even climb trees to get to apples.

It has 4 large incisor teeth for biting off the vegetation and gnawing through roots when tunneling. As with all rodents, these teeth continue to grow throughout their lifetime and so must be continually used to wear them back down. Woodchucks have 18 chewing teeth behind the incisors that are used to grind up the vegetation and their jaws can move from side to side as well as up and down. A unique little critter on display every day next to our roads.