



# I SAW IT ON THE TRAIL

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The Woodchuck (*Marmota monax*), or Groundhog, is one of the best known wild mammals in the N.E. USA, but few realize this rodent is a member of the Squirrel Family. When North America was first settled, woodchucks were relatively scarce, but as timbered areas were opened and woodland edge, fence rows and meadows increased, the woodchuck's range expanded.

Woodchucks prefer to live along the edges where timbered areas are bordered by open land or along fence rows and heavily vegetated gullies or stream banks. Here they dig their burrows. The main entrance is often located beneath a tree stump or rock and is usually conspicuous because of a pile of freshly excavated earth and stones. Side entrances are smaller and better concealed. The tunnels lead to an enlarged chamber, 3-6 feet underground, which contains the nest.

By the end of October, most woodchucks are curled up in a profound sleep in their underground nest. So deep is this sleep that even if an animal is warmed up, it requires several hours to awaken. The woodchuck is almost a complete vegetarian, eating leaves, flowers and soft stems of various grasses, of field crops such as clover and alfalfa, and of many kinds of wild herbs. Certain garden crops like peas, beans and corn are favorites. Chucks occasionally climb trees to obtain apples and pawpaws which they relish.

The breeding season begins in mid-February soon after the animals emerge from hibernation. Pregnancy lasts 31-33 days and the single, annual litter is born toward the end of March. At birth, the two to nine young are naked, blind and helpless. They measure about four inches long. The eyes open when the young are about 4 weeks old; although the kits come to the opening of the burrow at this time, they seldom venture outside until 6 or 7 weeks old. By midsummer, the young are 20 inches long and weigh about four pounds. About this time, they may dig temporary burrows near the nursery which they use for a short period. Later, they move some distance away and establish their own homes.

The role of the woodchuck as a builder of homes for other animals is significant; because of this, the woodchuck occupies an important niche in the wildlife community. Skunks, foxes, weasels, opossums and rabbits all use woodchuck burrows for their dens



## DETAILS:

**Size:** 16 - 20 inches long, not including a six inch tail

**Weight:** between 6 - 14 pounds.



Full grown Adult Woodchuck (Groundhog)



Typical Woodchuck Burrow