

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Woodchuck: the diligent digger

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

General Information

Woodchucks, also known as groundhogs, are a member of the squirrel family and reside throughout the east and mid-west sections of the United States and Canada. Woodchucks are vegetarians and can often be seen grazing near the edges of fields and roadways.

Woodchucks have small, heavy bodies set atop short, powerful legs. They have broad, flat heads with small rounded ears. Their feet are black and slightly flattened. The hind foot has five well-developed digits, terminating in curved claws that are used for digging.

Breeding takes place soon after they emerge from hibernation in early spring. Females bear a single litter with an average of 3 to 5 young. The young are born in May, furless, pink, and wrinkled, and remain blind for more than a month.

Woodchucks are excellent diggers and live in complex underground systems of burrows. There is usually a main entrance to the

burrow distinguished by a mound of soil and/or rocks around it, with several secondary entryways often used as escape routes. Burrows are often found near rocks, tree roots, or other supportive structures. They are used for protection from weather and predators, for rearing young, and for six months of hibernation every winter. They are often also shared by other wildlife.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

While some people welcome wildlife into their yards, some gardeners are naturally perturbed when hungry woodchucks view their plantings as all-you-can-eat buffets. If the culprit is nowhere to be seen, looking at the markings on the plants left behind can often indicate if a woodchuck was present, as woodchucks leave clean cut tears on plants, unlike the jagged edges of plants left by deer.

To deter woodchucks from gardens, attach a motion sensitive sprinkler to your garden hose. Placing scarecrows, balloons, and pinwheels and/or leaving a beach ball to blow in the wind near the garden, can also be effective. Visiting your garden often and mowing any long grasses near the garden will also help. Individual plants can be protected by sprinkling them with Epsom salts or covering them with fabric or gallon milk jugs with the bottoms removed. Placing rags soaked in ammonia on posts at intervals around the garden perimeter will also deter woodchucks.

Another highly effective way of discouraging woodchucks is to place wire fencing at least 3 to 4 feet high around the perimeter of the garden. Making sure the fence is somewhat loose and buried 1 foot underground will make it more difficult for a woodchuck to dig under or climb over it.



Woodchuck burrows can sometimes cause overlying structures to become unstable. In these situations, it is best to permanently exclude woodchucks from these burrows. Removing nearby ground cover, partially digging out the entryways, and placing ammonia-soaked rags nearby, will encourage evacuation of the burrow. A one-way door can then be installed to prevent reentry. However, care should be taken to make sure that there are no young that could be trapped inside the burrow (usually May through August). To see if the burrow is being used, loosely place grass in the entryway. If it goes undisturbed for several days, then the burrow is most likely unoccupied. To permanently seal the burrow, excavate the area around the entryway, and block the entryway with heavy-gauge welded wire, extending the wire well past the entryway on all sides and burying it at least 1 foot.