



Groundhog (Woodchuck)

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Photo by Cephas/Wikipedia

Groundhog (Woodchuck)

(*Marmota monax*)

The groundhog has several nicknames, including “woodchuck,” “land beaver” and “whistlepig.” Woodchuck likely originates from a Native American word, wejack or woodshaw, and may have roots in the Algonquian name for the animal, wuchak. Its other nickname, whistlepig, is based on it’s high-pitched whistle that is used as an alarm to the rest of the colony. The groundhog’s scientific name “*monax*” is also based on Native American origins; monax is the Indian word for digger.

Description

Groundhogs are large, heavy-bodied rodents attaining weights of 5 to 12 pounds and can be up to 2 feet long. They are covered with coarse hair ranging in color from brown to reddish yellow, usually tipped with silver. Their feet have five claw-bearing digits with thick, slightly curved claws. The head is short and broad. The legs are short and thickset. The tail is densely haired, slightly flattened and one-fifth to one-third of the animal’s total length. The ears are short, broad, rounded and well haired. The eyes are round and small.

History and Status

Groundhogs are native to North Carolina and have expanded their range in recent years; populations are stable to increasing. The groundhog is classified as a nongame animal for which there is no closed hunting season or bag limit. Groundhogs can also be trapped during the regulated trapping season with a trapping license. Groundhogs have adapted well to human activities such as agriculture and urban development and are often seen as a nuisance because they forage on crops and gardens and burrow on people’s properties. Groundhog burrows and dens provide homes for other wildlife species that use subterranean den sites.

For more information on this species, including status and any applicable regulations, visit ncwildlife.org/groundhog.

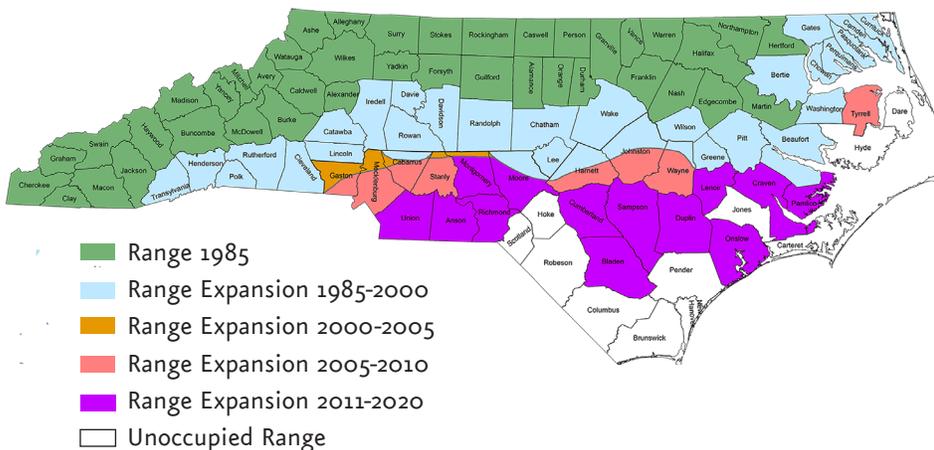
An accomplished climber and swimmer, the groundhog is the largest member of the squirrel family.



Photo by Wikimedia

Range and Distribution

Groundhogs are distributed from eastern Alaska across the southern half of Canada to the Atlantic Ocean and south in the eastern half of the United States to Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina. East of the Appalachian Mountains, North Carolina is the southernmost part of the groundhog’s range. The groundhog was historically confined to the Mountains of western North Carolina and the northern Piedmont but has recently expanded its range into the southern Piedmont and Coastal Plain regions.



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Habitats & Habits

Groundhogs inhabit a variety of habitats such as pastures, brushy woodlots, open woods and areas along stream banks or roadways. Their primary requirement is an area where their burrows can be constructed without being flooded or inundated with groundwater. Much of their time is spent standing upright and watchful near the entrance of their burrow. If they sense a threat, the woodchuck will give a sharp shrill, causing young to scurry into the burrow. They construct their burrows in areas that are unlikely to flood. They are diurnal animals, most active during the early morning and late afternoon hours.

Groundhogs are herbivorous and prefer the more tender parts of new growth from a variety of wild and cultivated plants. They hibernate during the winter from November until February.

Human Interactions

Most people have probably seen groundhogs by the roadside in spring or early summer. Their habit of feeding on roadside vegetation causes many groundhogs to be killed by cars. Other than a few predators such as hawks, owls, foxes and coyotes, the major causes of mortality for groundhogs are vehicles on highways, hunters and trappers.

Groundhog hunting and trapping provide a service to the landowner whose crops suffer depredation from the rodent's feeding habits or whose livestock have been lamed by stepping into a groundhog burrow. The most effective non-lethal method to prevent conflicts with groundhogs is to erect a fence around your yard or garden. Since groundhogs are adept climbers and diggers, fencing should be at least 3 feet high with another foot of fencing buried underground. There are no approved repellents for groundhogs, though some gardeners feel that ammonia and Epsom salts can be effective.

NCWRC Interactions

North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission biologists monitor trends in the groundhog population from several sources, most of which rely on cooperation from trappers. These sources include annual surveys to licensed trappers, reports from Wildlife Damage Control Agents, and observations provided by the public. If you have seen a groundhog outside the current range in North Carolina, please report this observation to the NC Wildlife Helpline: 866-318-2401

References

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Credits

Written by Colleen Olfenbittel, and Perry Sumner, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission; updated 2021.

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Rodentia

Average Size

Length: 20 to 27 in.

Weight: 5 to 12 lbs.

Food

Groundhogs are herbivorous and prefer tender plants such as clover, alfalfa, and grasses.

Breeding/Young

Sexually mature at 1 year old. Males generally mate with one female from late February to April. Females breed once per year and males will remain with the female for some time after breeding. Gestation period is 31 to 32 days. Litter size is four to six. At birth they weigh about 1 oz. and increase to about 2 oz. in one week. The young are born blind, hairless, and toothless, are weaned in about 2 months, and most will begin dispersing in late summer at about 3 months old. Thirty percent of female pups will stick around until the next year's litter is born.

Life Expectancy

Average 1 to 2 years. Few live longer than 4 years in the wild.



Juvenile groundhogs (Photo by Susan Sam)