

All About Groundhogs!

Classification: Groundhogs are mammals, rodents, and are from the species *Marmota Monax*; another name for a groundhog is a woodchuck, and its nick name is a whistlepig (the whistle being a sound they make in time of danger or while courting)

Range: found in North America and Canada in forests and fields

Anatomy: A groundhog grows to be about 17 to 20 inches long; it has a tail that is about 5 inches; body is bulky and limbs are short; hands and feet are black and have sharp, sturdy claws; they have teeth called incisors that continue to grow throughout their lives; the fur is brown-grey and eyes and nose are black; head is flat with a pointed snout.

Weight: A small groundhog will weigh about a half a pound when it emerges from the den for the first time in the spring; however, he quickly grows, and most likely by the end of the summer, will weigh about 9 to 11 pounds.

Diet: Groundhogs are mostly plant eaters and like grass, seeds, leaves, flowers, fruit, and some insects. Yup, just about anything that you most likely put in your garden!

Predators: Groundhogs are hunted by many animals, including wolves, dogs, coyotes, bobcats, foxes and humans. They cannot move very quickly so their best defense is to retreat into their burrows. Keen eyesight and hearing help warn them of danger. When they are alarmed, they often whistle, and thus their nickname, "whistlepig."

Hibernation: Groundhogs usually leave their summer dens to look for their winter dens which they enter in about late September or October; they go into a deep sleep that is like a coma, where the body temperature drops to a few degrees about freezing; the heart barely beats, the blood scarcely flows, and breathing nearly stops. To wake up from hibernation, the groundhog's internal clock seems to be affected by changes in the amount of daylight. Hormonal responses to cyclic changes in production of melatonin, a sleep related hormone, are thought by some to be the signal to wake up.

Life Span: Groundhogs can live about 6 to 8 years.

Mate Selection: The male groundhog does the courting; when he comes out of hibernation, he immediately seeks a female groundhog. He goes from den to den (sometimes whistling, and again, hence the nick name) until he finds one. The two share the den for a short time until the female is ready to give birth. At that time, she drives the father out of the den. The father is not allowed anywhere near the young cubs and has no part in raising them. So the male leaves in search of other females.

Cubs: Cubs are born approximately one month after the male and female mate, usually in April or May. They are born without fur and are blind. They weigh about an ounce and measure about 4 inches. It takes about two weeks for them to get fur and four weeks before they can open their eyes. At five weeks, they are running around. The mother will nurse them for about 6 weeks. When they are able to eat on their own, in about July or so, the mother will move each one from the home den to a separate den and leave it. However, she will visit each one daily for a few weeks to check on it. Litter size is anywhere from 3 to 9 cubs, usually about 5. They have only one litter per year.

Dens: groundhogs have both summer and winter dens, or burrows. The winter dens are usually built in dry, wooded areas and are two to four feet deep. It is here that the groundhog hibernates. Summer dens are built near grassy areas where food is plentiful. Dens typically have two entrances or more, one main entrance and one “peep hole” or escape route which offers protection from predators. There are separate areas for sleeping, nursing, and potty facilities. Groundhogs line their dens with leaves and grasses and keep them clean.

Families: Groundhogs are pretty much loners; the mothers and fathers do not share living quarters after the young are born.

Role in nature: In digging dens, or burrows, groundhogs improve the soil (by allowing more air and water to get underground, this helps break down the soil to form more valuable topsoil) and abandoned dens provide homes for other animals such as foxes and skunks. The latter two animals aid farmers by catching and eating millions of injurious small rodents and insects that are harmful to farm crops.

Information compiled and “smushed” from these sources:

www.hoghaven.com

www.enchantedlearning.com

A Scholastic Celebration of Groundhog Day, Scholastic Books