

Urban Wildlife Damage Control

The woodchuck—also known as groundhog—is commonly found to the east of a line extending through Manhattan southwest to Arkansas City. Populations of woodchucks seem to be increasing and extending their range further west in Kansas.

The scientific name is *Marmota monax*. The first part, *Marmota*, is the Latin word for “marmot,” the name given to the European marmot or the North American marmot, which is a close relative of the woodchuck. The last part, *monax* is an American Indian name for this rodent and means “the digger”; it alludes to the woodchuck’s habit of excavating burrows.

The woodchuck has a compact, chunky body supported by relatively short, strong legs. Its tail is short and bristly. Its forefeet have long, curved claws that are adapted for digging ground burrows where it seeks refuge and hibernates during winter months. Its color is usually a grizzled brownish-gray, although fur color may vary from white to black. Woodchucks have chisel-like incisor teeth. From tip of nose to end of tail, woodchucks are approximately 20 to 27 inches long and weigh from 5 to 12 pounds.

The early morning and evening hours are preferred for feeding as woodchucks depend on dew for much of their water intake. They eat large quantities of succulent plants. Woodchucks can become a nuisance when their feeding conflicts with people’s gardening efforts or when they dig burrows in hayfields. They may feed in gardens, flower beds, alfalfa and clover fields. Occasionally, woodchucks damage young trees in orchards or nurseries. Although woodchucks will climb trees, they prefer to eat fruit on the ground and normally do not cause damage by climbing trees to eat fruit.

Woodchucks often can be observed basking in the summer sun during the

warmest hours of the day. They sleep on the tops of fence posts, on stone walls, large rocks, fallen logs and grassy areas, all of which are close to the burrow entrance. Even feeding woodchucks normally do not travel farther than 50 yards from their dens. There are exceptions as male woodchucks have been known to travel long distances to find a mate. And on occasions, woodchucks will travel several hundred yards for forage in time of drought or to eat fallen orchard fruit.

Dens are typically located on the edge of woodlands, in fields along fence rows, or in little used barns or sheds. Often woodchucks will take up residence in stonewalls or woodpiles, using several auxiliary dens for shelter.

The burrows dug by woodchucks are from 25- to 30-feet long and from 2- to 5-feet deep. Normally two or three entrances are used, although there may be as many as five entrances. (Figure 1, Page 2.) The main entrance is identified by the mound of excavated dirt and stones that surround the entrance. A single chamber is formed at the end of the main entrance burrow, which is used for sleeping and the young. Another room is used for urination and defecation. In this way the den is kept relatively clean and free from disease.

Hibernation begins with the killing frosts, usually in October. And hibernation ends in the early spring,



usually in early February. Woodchucks mate in February and March.

Gestation requires 31 to 33 days. A single litter with two to nine (usually four) young is produced each season. The young are weaned by late June or early July, and soon strike out on their own, usually occupying old, abandoned dens or dig new dens.

The average life span of woodchucks is 4 to 5 years. Predators such as foxes, bobcat, coyotes, dogs and people are the main forces that limit woodchuck numbers.

Laws and Regulations

Currently woodchucks may be taken in Kansas by meeting the legal equipment and license requirements. The season is open year-round and there is no maximum daily bag or possession limit. Landowners may control problem woodchucks, which are causing damage on their property, without a license under the provisions of KSA 32-1002. This law states: “Kansas does not prevent owners or legal occupants of land from killing any animals when found in or near buildings on their premises, or when

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Bats, L-855 | <input type="checkbox"/> Skunks, L-862 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Birds, L-856 | <input type="checkbox"/> Tree Squirrels, L-863 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Blackbirds in Roosts, L-857 | <input type="checkbox"/> Snakes, L-864 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cottontail Rabbits, L-858 | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Woodchucks, L-865 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Muskrats, L-859 | <input type="checkbox"/> Woodpeckers, L-866 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Opossums, L-860 | <input type="checkbox"/> Woodrats, L-867 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Raccoons, L-861 | |

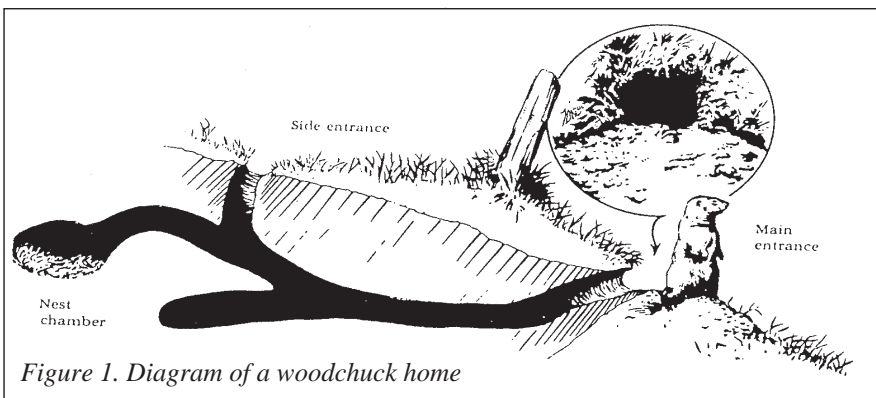


Figure 1. Diagram of a woodchuck home

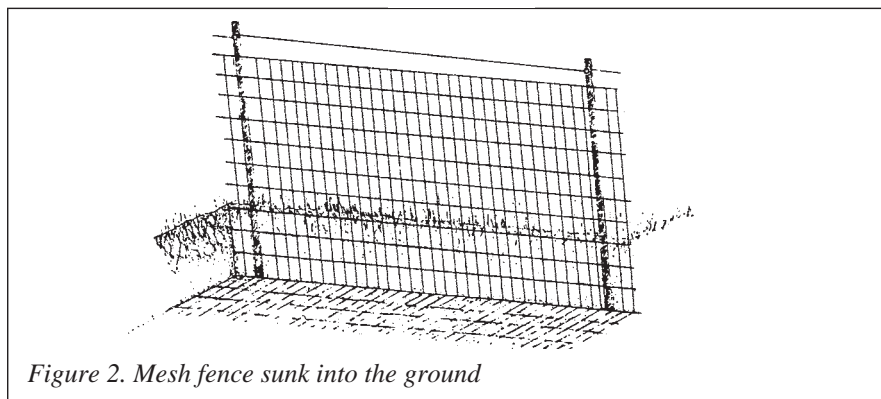


Figure 2. Mesh fence sunk into the ground

found destroying property, subject to the following: (A) the provisions of all federal laws and regulations governing protected species and provisions of the Kansas nongame and endangered species conservation act are met, (B) it is unlawful to use or possess with intent to use, any animal so killed unless authorized by rules and regulations of the secretary; and (C) such owners or legal occupants shall make reasonable efforts to alleviate their problems with any such animals before killing them.”

Woodchuck Problem Management

Shooting

In rural areas, woodchucks may be legally hunted in Kansas year-round and may be taken by properly licensed hunters. Landowners and hunters should agree on arrangements that will be mutually satisfactory and that will avoid unsafe shooting practices. Hunters should make every effort to use the carcass. A young, medium-size ground-hog makes

excellent table fare if properly prepared.

Woodchuck numbers are difficult to control once a population has established itself in good habitat. No control method, with the exception of fencing, is considered permanent. The home-owner may use several methods of damage control without destroying the woodchucks.

Fencing

The most permanent control method is fencing. The practicality of fencing depends on the size of the area to be fenced. Because woodchucks are excellent diggers, it is necessary to sink the fencing 2 to 3 feet into the ground. The entrance gate should be sturdy and elevated. Some gardeners prefer to build two separate sets of steps over the top of the fence. A person leaving the garden moves the steps on the outside of the fence.

Gardens and other small areas may be protected from woodchucks by erecting a fence of 2-inch x 4-inch mesh wire (Figure 2). The fence

should extend at least 2 feet above the ground with an electrified strand on top. The fence should extend 1 foot below the ground surface. The buried portion of the fence should be bent in a 90 degree angle, 1 foot level below the ground, with the bottom of the fence pointing away from the garden. This design discourages burrowing if it is started at the fence line. All electric fences have been used successfully; however exercise caution before using high voltage electric fencing equipment where children or pets may be present.

Trapping

Woodchucks may be trapped in Kansas by using cage traps made of wire mesh. Where food is abundant, woodchucks may not enter cage traps for bait. Traps may be placed at burrow entrances or at the site of damage and should be baited with apples or other fresh fruit. Metal cage traps are most efficient because woodchucks may chew their way out of wooden cage traps.

A cage trap should be at least 10" x 10" x 24" to 12" x 12" x 36" in size. Double door see-through cage traps should be at least 10" x 10" x 30" in size. Other baits such as cantaloupe, carrots with tops, lettuce, cabbage or ample amounts of fresh peas can be used to entice woodchucks into cage traps. It is a good idea to conceal the trap with canvas or grass.

If baiting fails, a double door cage trap can be set directly in the woodchuck's trail and concealed. Often grocery stores will give people baiting material that the owners cannot sell. All traps should be inspected twice a day, morning and evening.

After the woodchucks are trapped, they can be transported at least 10 miles away and released into suitable habitat. People should consider the effects of live trapping woodchucks in the autumn immediately before hibernation or during the spring while the young are in the dens.

Animals trapped and released before hibernation may not be able to

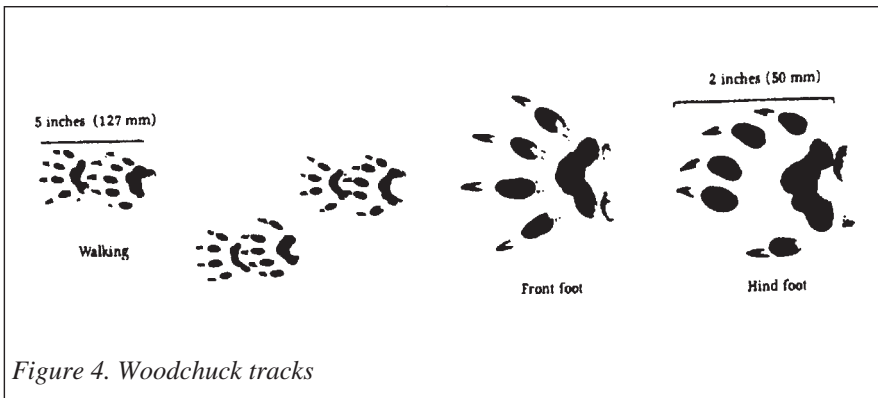


Figure 4. Woodchuck tracks

find a winter den. Trapping female woodchucks in the spring may cause the death of their young.

Woodchucks can be important to the rural wildlife community. Without their activity, the abundance of other kinds of wild creatures may not be as plentiful. The abandoned burrows provide escape cover and shelter for many kinds of animals including rabbits, raccoons, foxes, weasels and opossum.

As woodchucks increase, Kansans may see an increase in some of the other wildlife species.

For further information write to Animal Damage Control, Call Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506-1600, (785) 532-5734.

Figure of woodchuck on page 1, diagram of woodchuck home on page 2 and paw prints on page 3 reprinted from The Wild Mammals of Missouri by Charles W. and Elizabeth R. Schwartz, by permission of the University of Missouri Press. Copyright 1981 by the Curators of the University of Missouri.

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