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Woodchucks

“Every year on February 2, exactly halfway between the winter solstice and spring equinox, Americans eagerly await the emergence of Punxsutawney Phil, the Western Pennsylvania groundhog who predicts the conclusion of winter by seeing his own shadow. Whether or not you believe in the folklore, Groundhog Day is a cherished tradition”

2020 Albrecht Powell

Phil the groundhog appeared from his burrow on a snowy Tuesday February 2nd morning and saw his shadow, declaring there would be six more weeks of winter, reported the CBS News.

I think Phil meant business especially looking forward at the forecast this week. Now we know that a groundhog cannot actually predict the weather however what we do know is, that like Phil, groundhogs are also known as the woodchuck. The scientific name for woodchuck is *Marmota monax*. 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. Monax is an American Indian name for this rodent and means “the digger”; it refers to the woodchuck’s habit of excavating burrows. The woodchuck has a compact body, short strong legs and a coarse tail. 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 and 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. (Urban Wildlife Damage Control)

Woodchucks prefer the early morning and evening hours for feeding and as for drinking, they depend on dew for much of their water intake. They eat large quantities of succulent plants and they can often be a nuisance when their feeding habits conflicts with people’s gardening efforts or when they dig burrows in pastures and hayfields. They normally do not travel farther than 50 yards from their dens however male woodchucks have been known to travel long distances to find a mate. On occasions, they will travel several hundred yards for forage in time of drought or to eat fallen orchard fruit. Their homes or Dens are typically located on the edge of woodlands, in fields along fence rows, or in little used barns or sheds and often, will take up residence in stonewalls or woodpiles, using several secondary dens for shelter. (Urban Wildlife Damage Control)

The woodchuck’s burrows are from 25- to 30-feet long and from 2- to 5-feet deep. There are normally two or three entrances used, though there may be as many as five entrances. The main entrance is identified by the mound of unearthed 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. (Urban Wildlife Damage Control)

Sometimes the groundhog/woodchuck can be a nuisance to landowners and homeowners. Therefore, woodchucks may be taken in Kansas when meeting the legal equipment and license requirements and landowners may control problem woodchucks, which are causing damage on their property, without a license under the provisions of KSA 32-1002. There are ways to control woodchucks. While fencing is the most permanent control method, cage traps made of wire mesh are also effective. When trapping, keep in mind that when animals are trapped and released before hibernation they may not be able to find a winter den. Trapping females 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. (Urban Wildlife Damage Control)

For more information on woodchucks please call the Cherokee County Extension office at 620-429-3849, or visit K-State Research Extension wildlife website at www.wildlife.k-state.edu.

Source

2020 Albrecht Powell, Everything You Need to Know About Groundhog Day
<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-groundhog-day-2707298>

Feb. 3, 2021, CBS News, Groundhog day 2021: Punxsutawney Phil Predicts 6 More Weeks of Winter
<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/groundhog-day-2021-punxsutawney-phil-predicts-6-more-weeks-of-winter/>

Charles Lee, Wildlife Specialist September 1992, Urban Wildlife Damage Control
<https://bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/L865.pdf>