

Is a Groundhog Invading Your Yard?

Each year, College Park Animal Control receives many calls from citizens complaining of groundhogs in their yard. Groundhogs, also called woodchucks, are common in many parts of North America. These bulky, short-tailed creatures are brownish in color and range in weight from 5-13 pounds and length from 16-22 inches with the males being larger. Groundhogs typically live in underground dens that are connected by a complex tunnel system that is normally 2-5 feet below the ground and often 8-30 feet long with at least two openings. The groundhog's den and burrow system serves as a place for it to hibernate, mate, raise young, and be protected from predators. Being a strict herbivore, the groundhog leaves its den during daylight hours, mainly in the early morning and evening, to feed on a large variety of vegetation. They rarely venture more than 150 ft from their den. The home range for groundhogs is normally between 40-160 acres, for they will use a den for a few seasons and then abandon it in search of a new one. Other wildlife such as skunks, raccoons, rabbits, fox, opossums, snakes, and possibly rats quickly inhabit abandoned dens. Groundhogs hibernate from late fall to late winter (a 5-6 month duration). Around March and April, the groundhogs will breed and produce an average of four offspring. The young are weaned in June or July and will then be seen out feeding with the adults.



Groundhogs rarely pose a threat to humans or pets, as they are more afraid of them than anything. They sometimes emit a shrill “whistle” when frightened and will run into their den opening. However, a cornered groundhog will fight to defend itself and, like all mammals, they can carry the rabies virus. Care and respect needs to be taken when dealing with wildlife, including the groundhog.

Conflict often occurs between humans and groundhogs when yards and gardens are destroyed. Groundhogs can move a tremendous amount of dirt every day. This disturbance of the earth is actually beneficial to the recycling and cultivation of nutrients in the soil, but if the digging occurs under a structure it can weaken the foundation. Gardens are an attractive source of food to groundhogs. In some cases, a heavy mesh fence can be installed that is at least 3-4 feet high with several inches buried into the ground. A single strand electric wire can be added to this fence system as an extra safeguard. Scare tactics such as a scarecrow or things that move or make noise with the wind can also be tried.

Groundhogs have an incredible sense of hearing and smell. It is their smell that they use to locate partially opened or empty dens. Placing ammonia, peanut oil, or olive oil soaked rags near or in the den of the groundhog can essentially “stink” the animal out, but be sure to fill in the den appropriately afterwards to avoid other animals moving in. If the den is under a shed or deck, be sure to cover gaps with mesh or wood once the groundhog leaves. If you choose to exclude groundhogs from your yard, do not take measures prior to the babies being weaned (optimally wait until late summer), as the tactics can leave the young stranded and may cause them to die. Living with the wildlife in your backyard can sometimes be challenging and frustrating, but learning to be resourceful in outwitting these creatures and being tolerant of their presence will lead to a happy life for all involved.