

News Article

By: John E. Woodmansee, Extension Educator, Agriculture/Natural Resources

E-mail: jwoodman@purdue.edu

Date: April 2, 2018

Please use by: April 12, 2018

Purdue Extension – Whitley County
Whitley County Courthouse Annex
115 South Line Street
Columbia City, IN 46725-2325
Phone: (260) 244-7615 or (260) 625-3313
www.extension.purdue.edu/whitley

You say woodchuck, I say groundhog

I have to admit from the outset that I have a bad attitude toward woodchucks, A.K.A. groundhogs (*Marmota monax*). I have personally battled woodchucks in crops, and under a home. If you have also experienced conflicts with these animals, read on.

Woodchucks are actually large rodents, the largest member of the squirrel family. They are herbivores and consume a wide variety of grasses, forbs, and the leaves and fruit of woody vegetation. They occasionally consume invertebrates. In crop areas, woodchucks are especially fond of the soybean plant, but it will also feed on young corn plants and even ears in the milk stage. They can also consume alfalfa. An adult woodchuck consumes between 1 and 1½ pounds of vegetation daily.

When scouting soybean fields, I could always tell where groundhogs resided. About a ¼ acre or so of young soybean plants had been clipped off near their burrow.

Woodchucks can cause substantial damage by feeding on vegetation and by burrowing under structures or in lawns. The extensive burrowing activities of woodchucks in fields can interfere with farm operations, cause damage to equipment, injury to livestock, and create significant erosion problems in levees, pond dams and railroad embankments. Around private homes, one or two woodchucks are capable of ruining a small garden almost overnight, not to mention the ankle-twisting opportunities they create with their burrows.

Redeeming aspects of woodchucks would include that their burrows often provide refuge for other wildlife such as rabbits, opossums, raccoons, skunks, foxes, and even some game birds. They also contribute to the aeration and mixing of the soil through their burrowing activities. Woodchucks dig extensive burrow systems up to about 5 ft. deep and 50 ft. long.

Control efforts should be carried out during early spring when active burrows are easy to find, the young woodchucks have not yet scattered, and there is less likelihood of harming other wildlife.

Woodchucks are most practically controlled in crop fields via fumigation of their dens or by shooting (where legal). Around buildings or high fire hazard areas, or where it is desirable to control the woodchucks with a nonlethal approach, live-trapping is the safest and most appropriate means. If you can determine that no risk to local pets exists, lethal traps can be used.

Brian MacGowan, Purdue Extension wildlife specialist, said groundhogs do not require a permit to trap in Indiana. Resident landowners or tenants can legally capture these species if the animal is causing damage to the property.

MacGowan said you have two choices of what to do with wildlife you capture – let it go or euthanize it (put to death humanely by injection). In either case, you may not possess an animal for more than 24 hours. If you relocate an animal, you must have permission of the landowner or property manager (even for public lands) AND you may only release that animal within the county of capture. Captured woodchucks should be relocated at least 5 miles from the trap site and released in an area where they will not cause a problem for someone else.

Fumigating woodchuck burrows is accomplished using gas cartridges that release carbon monoxide. Gas cartridges are available from local farm supply stores and some county Extension offices (including Whitley County). Caution should be taken to avoid prolonged breathing of gas cartridge smoke. Also, since the cartridges are ignited and sparks may be thrown, they should not be used near buildings or any combustible materials. If using, read and follow all label directions.

For more information, access free Purdue Extension publications that discuss woodchucks, both available at Purdue's Education Store <https://mdc.itap.purdue.edu>. Search for "Common Indiana Mammals," publication number FNR-413-W, and "Woodchucks," publication ADM-16-W. Much of the above information are excerpts from these publications. Additionally, Indiana Department of Natural Resources offers information on groundhogs at: <http://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/5694.htm>. Search for blog posts by MacGowan and other experts on wildlife and nature topics at Purdue Extension's "Got Nature?" blog site: <https://www.purdue.edu/fnr/extension/got-nature-blog/>.

It is the policy of the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service that all persons have equal opportunity and access to its educational programs, services, activities, and facilities without regard to race, religion, color, sex, age, national origin or ancestry, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, disability or status as a veteran.

Purdue University is an Affirmative Action institution. This material may be available in alternative formats.